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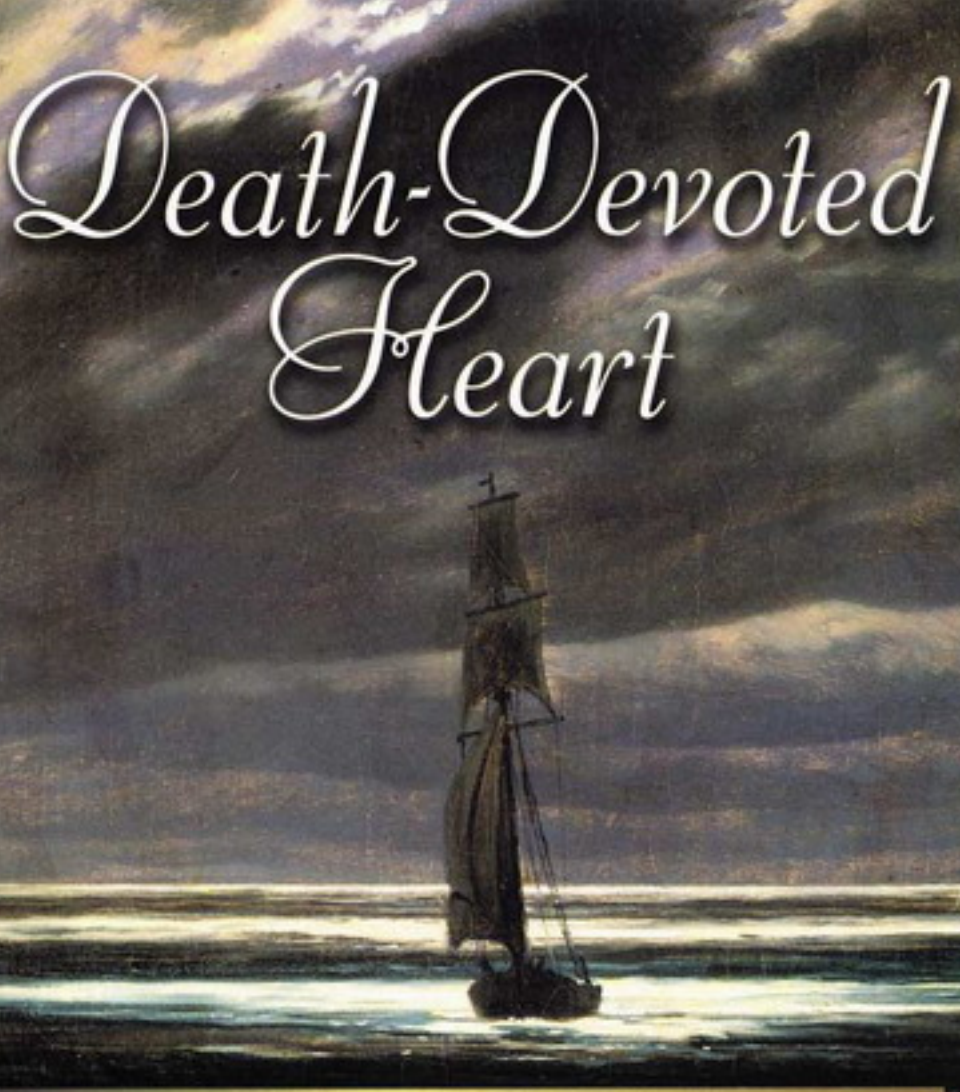

SEX AND THE SACRED IN WAGNER'S *Tristan and Isolde*

ROGER SCRUTON

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ROGER SCRUTON

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PREFACE

This is a book about Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde;* it is also an attempt to gain insight into the nature of erotic love and the peculiar place of the erotic in our culture. The argument is sometimes philosophical, sometimes critical, sometimes musicological. But I intend the result as a guide to Wagner's great music drama and as a vindication of its stature. The originality and subtlety of Wagner's music have seldom been questioned; nevertheless, critics have often discussed *Tristan und Isolde* as though the drama, in itself, is of no great significance, a sublimation of the composer's love for Mathilde Wesendonck, or a wistful romantic dream. In this work I attempt to show that the real drama takes place in the music, and that it has a profound religious meaning, as relevant to us who live in a profane and secular age as it was to Wagner's contemporaries.

I acknowledge a debt to Ernst Kurth and Alfred Lorenz, whose early studies of Wagner's harmony and formal organization have gradually won for themselves an honorable place in musicological thinking. I have learned much from the musicological writings of Robert Bailey, Carolyn Abbate, and Carl Dahlhaus; much from the anthropological writings of René Girard, Walter Burkert, and Emile Durkheim; and much from the philosophical writings of Schopenhauer, Feuerbach, and Nietzsche, all three of whom had a special significance for Wagner. I am especially indebted to Michael Tanner, whose chapter on *Tristan und Isolde* in his book *Wagner* sparked off the train of thought that led to this book.

My greatest debt, however, is to Immanuel Kant, the dry old sage of Königsberg, for whom neither music nor the erotic had any evident ap-

peal, but who was nevertheless the ultimate inspiration behind the view of human nature that is expressed and vindicated in Wagner's operas, and which finds its most surprising and moving elaboration in the tale of Tristan and Isolde. While this book is a guide to Wagner's music drama, therefore, it can also be read in another way as a case study in the Kantian philosophy of man.

Previous versions of this book were read by David Matthews, Anthony O'Hear, Bob Grant, David Wiggins, Michael Markham, Michael Tanner, and Robin Holloway: their comments saved me from many errors and stimulated me to think further about the argument. I am particularly grateful to the Nexus Institute at Tilburg University, and to Rob Riemen, its director, for inviting me to a stimulating conference on love and death, and compelling me to put on paper some of the thoughts about *Tristan und Isolde* that are contained in this book.

Malmesbury 2002

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ONE

Wagner and Religion

Wagner was an artist with an agenda, and this agenda was nothing less than the redemption of humankind. At one stage in his life Wagner wanted to redeem the world through revolutionary politics, of the romantic and utopian kind that inspired so many of the intellectual supporters of the 1848 revolutions. Later he came to accept that the yearning for redemption is a religious yearning, that it cannot be fulfilled by politics, and that it demands an act of otherworldly renunciation. But Wagner's religious faith was shaky at best and scarcely contained within the bounds of orthodox Christianity. So he set out to discover a redemption that needs no God to accomplish it.

In pursuing this idea Wagner could fairly be described as one of the great humanists of modern times. But he was a humanist of a peculiar kind, who recognized humanity's religious need and tried to make man his own redeemer, so as to ennoble the human beyond the divine. This attempt compelled him toward idealism and pessimism in equal measure—idealism about our nature, pessimism about our lot. In this book I explore one of Wagner's majestic attempts to articulate the idea of redemption in artistic and dramatic form. And I shall examine the origin of all such ideals in the peculiar metaphysical predicament of human beings when they come face to face with their incarnation and know themselves simultaneously as both determined and free.

Like many of his contemporaries, Wagner believed that the society into which he was born was morally and spiritually degenerate. High ideals had once animated the German people; noble thoughts and noble

deeds had thrived on German soil. Since those times, however, luxury, effeminacy, and materialism had ruined the soul, and the truly human—the thing which invites redemption and which may also achieve it—had become hidden in the clouds of appetite. Such, in broadest outline, was Wagner's vision; and it naturally invites the question: when was it otherwise? When, and how, did those noble thoughts and deeds make themselves known?

Wagner was too serious a thinker to respond with dates, places, and persons. Instead, he applied himself to the study of the surviving literature of the early Germanic tribes, and to the poetry of medieval Germany. His purpose was not to identify exemplary people and historical events but to acquaint himself with a culture in which the real had been penetrated through and through by the ideal: a culture in which people did not merely do things but also lived up to things. Thereby he discovered myth—not as a collection of fables and beliefs, nor as a primitive religion, but as a distinct category of human thought, as open to us, Wagner thought, in a world of scientific skepticism as it had been open to the inhabitants of ancient Greece or Iceland. Myth dawned on Wagner as a form of social hope. It was a way of thinking that could restore to modernity the lost sense of the ideal, without which human life is worthless.

Wagner's discovery of myth is not merely a matter of one person's moral and artistic credo. It is also one of the great intellectual advances of modern times, the ancestor and inspiration of comparative anthropology, symbolist poetry, psychoanalysis, and many aesthetic and theological doctrines that are now common currency. Wagner is given credit for this by Claude Lévi-Strauss (who acknowledges the composer as the main inspiration behind his "structuralist" method),[1] by the anthropologist and medievalist Jessie L. Weston, and by Weston's disciple, T. S. Eliot, in *The Waste Land*. The idea of myth as a dramatization of deep and hidden truths about the human psyche entered common currency with Freud's theory of the unconscious. Freud identified our "complexes" through the myths of Greek tragedy and argued that these myths encapsulate the universal psychic residues of our sexual development. Freud's pupil C. G. Jung gave an even more prominent role to myth, which he saw as the outgrowth of collective emotion and religious need, and the archetypal form

of human thinking. Not surprisingly, Wagner's own works have lent themselves to extensive and often illuminating analysis from both Freudian and Jungian perspectives. However, the accumulation of myth-analyzing, myth-dramatizing, and myth-making that has ensued in the wake of Wagner has made it all the more necessary for us to revisit Wagner's own approach and to study the freshness and vitality with which he transformed ancient myth and legend into quintessentially modern art.

A myth, for Wagner, is not a fable or a religious doctrine but a vehicle for human knowledge. The myth acquaints us with ourselves and our condition, using symbols and characters that give objective form to our inner compulsions. Myths are set in the hazy past, in a vanished world of chthonic forces and magniloquent deeds. But this obligatory "pastness" is a heuristic device. It places the myth and its characters before recorded time and therefore in an era that is purged of history. It lifts the story out of the stream of human life and endows it with a meaning that is timeless.

Wagner's original impulse, therefore, which was to discover in the ancient legends of the Germanic people the living record of the time of heroes, led him back to his starting point in the modern world. The time of heroes was a mythical time—and mythical time is *now.* Myths do not speak of what was but of what is eternally. They are magical-realist summaries of the actual world, in which the moral possibilities are personified and made flesh. Hence the *Ring,* Wagner's incomparable synthesis of the Germanic and Icelandic myths as they were reflected in the dark mirror of early Germanic literature, became the most determinedly modern of his works, the one which more than any other provides a commentary on modern life and on the hopes and fears that thrive in it. Yet planted within the bitter and often cynical drama, like a seed that survives in the desert and suddenly flowers at the first drop of rain, is the heroic ideal—the ideal that Wagner had searched for as a past reality, but which he discovered to be a myth, and therefore all the more real for us, being written not in the past tense but in the eternal present.

The heroic ideal, enshrined in the love of Siegfried and Brünnhilde, was not refuted but vindicated, for Wagner, by its mythical setting. Of course Wagner did not see the legends that he wove into dramas as we

would see them. But he responded to their hidden fund of religious feeling, and this response endows the Wagnerian music dramas with their distinctive spiritual glow.

As to whether Wagner himself had any vestige of religious belief, suffice it to say that the question is both highly controversial and ultimately irrelevant. *Mein Leben* makes cursory gestures of deference toward the Protestant Church; *Die Meistersinger* celebrates a *bürgerliche Gesellschaft* rooted in the beliefs, ceremonies, and institutions of the Christian faith. And it is hard to accept that *Parsifal* was composed in a spirit of dispassionate anthropological curiosity—certainly Nietzsche did not think so, even if he saw the opera as more religiose than religious.[2] Yet the composer lived in defiance of Christian morality, the church had no day-to-day significance for him, and much of his inspiration came from atheist philosophers such as Feuerbach and Schopenhauer. His appropriation of the ideas, symbols, and liturgy of Christianity in *Parsifal* should be set against his project (never realized, but dearly cherished) for a Buddhist music drama, *The Victors*—Buddhism appealing to Wagner precisely because it seemed to present religious emotions without theological beliefs. And Wagner's references to religion in his personal correspondence are tinged with skepticism, anticlericalism, and a kind of anthropological distance from the trappings of religious observance that enabled him to praise Christ and the Buddha, Christian redemption and Buddhist *nirvana,* as though referring to a single human ideal. *Tristan und Isolde*—arguably Wagner's most perfect work of art, and the one that has the greatest claim to occupy the psychic space traditionally reserved for religion—is remarkable for the fact that the only God to whom reference is made in its text is the merely allegorical Frau Minne, the medieval equivalent of Ovid's Amor. For these and similar reasons many commentators portray Wagner as an atheist, though an atheist entranced by mystical dreams.[3]

Even if Wagner the man made no place for religion, however, Wagner the artist was entirely given over to it. Not only was he imaginatively involved to the utmost in the myths, legends, and stories that form the background to his dramas. What we see on the stage and hear in the music are human beings steeped in a religious form of life, surrounded by su-

pernatural powers, and living, as it were, on the threshold of the transcendental. For Wagner, as for the Greeks, a myth was not a decorative fairy tale but the elaboration of a secret, a way of both hiding and revealing mysteries that can be understood only in religious terms, through the ideas of sanctity, holiness, and redemption. These are ideas we all need, Wagner believed, and, although the common people perceive them through the veil of religious doctrine, they come alive in the great examples of love and renunciation, finding articulate form in art.[4] Wagner's own words best explain his stance: "It is reserved to art to salvage the kernel of religion, inasmuch as the mythical images which religion would wish to be believed as true are apprehended in art for their symbolic value, and through ideal representation of those symbols art reveals the concealed deep truth within them."[5]

This does not mean that we should dismiss the influence of Feuerbach and Schopenhauer: later I shall give an account of the important Schopenhauerian input into *Tristan und Isolde*.[6] But we should recognize that for Wagner philosophy was a theology-substitute, a way of systematizing the intense vision of love, suffering, and redemption put before us in the dramas. He eagerly seized on Schopenhauer's theory of the uniform will behind appearance, of the tragic mistake of individual existence, and of the refuge that we have in death, precisely because it formed a commentary on, and a rationalization of, the mystery that occurs on the Wagnerian stage. But like every theological system, the commentary is at one remove from the mystery, and it is in the mystery that the meaning of religion resides. As Hugh Brody has put it in his book about hunter-gatherers, "mysteries are repeated, not explained."[7] We understand them not by theological argument but by participation. It is to this act of participation that the Wagnerian music drama invites us, just as we are invited to the altar in the sacred ritual of a religious gathering. If we are to make sense of the great Wagnerian dramas, therefore, we must understand the currency in which they trade—the currency of the sacred. That is one of the tasks I have set myself in this study.

A world of sacred things is a world of sanctity, consecration, and sacrifice, and also of sacrilege and desecration: these things are connected, not merely etymologically, but also in the depths of our social emotions.

This fact explains both the subject matter of Wagner's dramas and their premodern setting. Wagner's dramas focus on acts of sacrifice, on sacred loves, and on the sacrilege done to love by faithlessness and forgetting. They involve intense moments of consecration, in which death is both courted and spurned. And their premodern setting acquaints us with a world in which rituals, oaths, and acts of heroic sacrifice are in no way seen as intrusions into the human normality but are taken for granted, as windows in the empirical world that look out on to the transcendental.

Hence Wagner's fascination with medieval German poetry, in which he discovered the same kind of universal symbolism, and the same proximity to sacred things, that he discerned in the old Germanic myths. Wagner based three operas—*Tannhäuser, Lohengrin,* and *Die Meistersinger*—on his researches into medieval German society. His greatest artistic triumph, however, lay in his own retelling of two of the tales of chivalry: that of Tristan and Isolde, and that of Parsifal. These two tales occupy a central place in German medieval literature, with versions of the first by Gottfried von Strassburg and of the second by Wolfram von Eschenbach that rank among the high points of medieval literature.

In retelling these tales, Wagner paid meticulous attention to their premodern settings. For he wished to create a world in which the sacred is a day-to-day event: an event that can be shown without strain on the stage. But Wagner was also engaged in a peculiarly modern project. He did not wish merely to acquaint his audience with vanished forms of society or defunct religious beliefs. He sought to distil from those old visions of human destiny a modern ideal of heroic passion—a passion that could justify the ultimate sacrifice and indeed *require* that sacrifice as its fulfillment and its price. To accomplish this, however, Wagner had to remake the idea of the hero. The Wagnerian hero had to be both plausible as a modern human being and at the same time exemplary, setting a pattern of action that instills a renewed sense of human life and purpose. The hero would point the way to redemption by showing that mortality, contingency, and the accidental *Geworfenheit* of our existence are in fact preconditions of the sacrifice that makes life worthwhile.

Nietzsche, who began his creative life in the shadow of Wagner, came to repudiate the Wagnerian conception of the hero. His rejection was not

for the reasons that trouble modern critics, who cannot abide romantic heroes in any form, but because, in Nietzsche's view, the heroic in Wagner is a sham. Rather than accept Wagner's characters in the terms suggested by the drama—terms in which Wagner himself, as a disciple of Feuerbach, did not believe—we should, Nietzsche advises, translate them "into reality, into the modern—let us be even crueller—into the bourgeois!" And what then? We find ourselves among the "metropolitan" problems of Parisian decadents—"always five steps from the hospital."[8]

If Nietzsche is right in this judgment, then we should all treat Wagner with reserve—a reserve that would be fatal to the artistic intention. But it will be my contention in this work that Nietzsche is wrong, that Wagner triumphantly succeeds in reconstructing the heroic idea, and that, in the course of doing so, he casts profound light on the human predicament and on the special case of that predicament which is life in the modern world.

Heroes of the old type are larger-than-life versions of humanity, who live, love, and suffer more completely than the rest of us and who illustrate the possibilities to which humanity, with divine assistance, may aspire. Such are the heroes of Classical literature. Wagner's heroes are not like that, since their heroism is entirely self-generated, an outgrowth of their freedom, rather than the gift of a god. And the Wagnerian hero exists in two versions, corresponding to a fundamental division between the forms of human love. Heroes of compassion *(agape)* renounce their desires for the sake of others, and thereby redeem and renew the social order. Such is Parsifal and also Hans Sachs. Heroes of erotic love *(eros)* exist outside the social order in a state of exalted solitude; but they too long either to redeem or be redeemed through an act of loving sacrifice. Redemption comes when, having found the love that meets their inner need, they are carried onward by it to extinction.

Although this vision was confirmed in time by Wagner's reading of Schopenhauer, for whom original sin is "the crime of existence itself," it can be seen in the very first truly Wagnerian work of art: *Der fliegende Holländer.* And our sympathy for the Wagnerian heroes—a sympathy brilliantly "managed" by the music that propels them—is not the artificial thing that Nietzsche pilloried. It stems from the deep-down recognition

that their predicament is ours. Precisely because we live in a morbidly unheroic world—a world of cost-benefit calculation, in which gods and heroes have no place—we are driven to regard our own existence as some kind of cosmic mistake. If it is to have a meaning, this can come only through a gesture that throws all calculation aside, that recklessly disregards both cost and benefit and freely embraces its own absurdity.

In erotic love we aspire to this condition, and our lives are briefly irradiated by happiness as the physical and mental cherishing of another fills our hearts with a sense of freedom and uniqueness. But devotion wears thin, the beloved loses his or her character as an exclusive destiny, and little by little the thought arises of better versions and more rewarding deals. Love degenerates into cost and benefit, and comes to seem like just another version of the primal error. (Such is the symbolism of the drink of forgetting, which sunders Siegfried from Brünnhilde.[9]) But in those sublime moments when love prepares to sacrifice itself for the beloved—in other words, when it wills its own extinction—the shadow of accountancy disappears. And those moments in and out of time constitute our redemption: they are moments of consecration, in which life is shown to be worthwhile.

Of course few of us live like that—and, from the point of view of the species, the fewer the better. But that is precisely why Wagner's art is so enthralling. For it shows man himself as his own redeemer, and the proof that this redemption is possible—even if it is a proof that depends on the highest artistic contrivance—clears the psychic space that we require. We live as if we could make that final sacrifice, as if we could free ourselves, through some absolute and peremptory self-command, from the original mistake. This "as if" permeates our daily thoughts and feelings, and reconciles us to each other and the world.

There is another way of seeing what Wagner is getting at. Modern people are living beyond the death of their gods. And this means that we live with an enhanced awareness of our contingency—of the fact of being thrown into the world with neither goal nor explanation. And yet, just as much as our forebears, we are social beings who judge and are judged by our fellows. We do not rescue ourselves from this predicament by discarding guilt and shame, even if that is the preferred modern solution. For

people without shame—those who live beyond judgment and in the moment alone—are both shameless and shameful. We recoil from them as people incapable of love. But we also envy their self-centered ways. Like them, we are tempted to seek our own advantage, indifferent to those whom we harm. We are tempted to live by rational self-interest, judging everything—the sexual act included—in terms of cost and benefit. *Homo economicus,* who exchanges duty for pleasure and value for price, seems to us to have freed himself from guilt. But if he has done so, we recognize, it is because he has freed himself also from love.

Erotic love does not lead us to escape our guilt, but rather puts us in a position where we confront and expiate it. Love of the highest kind is a pilgrimage to a place of purification and sacrifice. And at that place stands Death, guardian of the ultimate mystery. In love our contingency becomes a necessity, and our mortality a kind of eternity—provided only that we accept these things with fullness of heart, wanting to justify the love that we receive and to give love in return. We may not achieve the highest renunciation which that ideal requires. But by holding the ideal before us we are steadily redeemed from our original failing. Therefore we should live *as if* a heroic love were possible, and *as if* we could renounce life for the sake of it. One purpose of myth is to present the "as if" in a concrete form that enlists and renews our belief in it.

As Wagner saw—and saw more deeply than any other modern artist—a myth is not just a fiction, and our engagement with it is never just a game. The myth sets before us in allegorical form a truth about our condition, but a truth that is veiled in mystery. Through the myth we understand both the thing to which we aspire and the forces that prevent us from attaining it. And we understand these things not theoretically, but by living through them in imagination and sympathy—in something like the way that the fate of Demeter is lived through by the one who sings the Homeric hymn to her, or the crucifixion of Christ is lived through by the choir and congregation during Bach's *St. Matthew Passion.*

The myth, through its reenactment, shapes our emotions, encouraging us to live as if we could achieve the higher state to which the god promises to raise us. Hence at the heart of every myth lies a ritual—a mystery in which we participate and which arouses and channels our

communal and prepersonal needs. The Wagnerian work of art abounds in these moments of ritual and often crystallizes around a ritual sacrifice such as that to which Tristan and Isolde voluntarily submit, or that which Siegfried has thrust upon him in the last act of *Götterdämmerung*. Wagner anticipated modern anthropology in recognizing religion as authorized by ritual, and in seeing the ritual itself as the true origin of the sacred. This conception provides the theme of *Parsifal,* a work that explains the Christian Eucharist and that shows us why the Eucharist must be constantly repeated. We need to rehearse the transition from the fallen to the redeemed state in order to renew in ourselves the aspiration to live as if redemption were achievable. And the Eucharist, in providing us with a notional triumph over evil, over death, and over all that drags us down to the animal kingdom, renews our faith in ourselves as creatures destined to live in another and higher way.

To understand the depth of the Wagnerian "as if" is to understand the condition of the modern soul. Modern people believe that they are animals, parts of the natural order, bound by laws tying them to the material forces that govern everything. They believe that the gods are their invention, and that death is exactly what it seems. Their world has been disenchanted and their illusions destroyed. At the same time they cannot live as though that knowledge were the whole truth of the human condition. Even modern people are compelled to praise and blame, love and hate, reward and punish. Even modern people—especially modern people—are aware of the self as the center of their being; and even modern people try to connect to other selves around them. They therefore see others *as if* they were free beings, animated by a self or soul, and with a more than worldly destiny. If we abandon that perception, then human relations dwindle into a machinelike parody of themselves, the world is voided of love, duty, and desire, and only the body remains. Modern science has tempted us with the thought of the "as if-ness" of human freedom; but it could never equip us to live without the belief in it. And this deep and indispensable belief is what Wagner seizes on in his cosmic myths.

The *Ring* cycle shows us people living in an enchanted world—a world in which the gods roam, brimful of interest in humanity, and in

which the forces that thwart and abet us are personalized and prayed to. But this enchantment, which sets the gods in Valhalla and laws in the human world, is also a usurpation. The gods spring from our unconscious needs and strivings—they are thrown off by that great explosion of moral energy, whereby the human community first emerges from the natural order and idealizes itself. They therefore bear the marks of a deeper nature—a nature that is preconscious, premoral, and unfree. Examine them too closely and their credentials dissolve—and how wonderfully Wagner shows this, not only in the character of Wotan but also in the narrative that constantly and continuously deconstructs him, needs no emphasis. Consequently the gods stand in need of us for their redemption. The old hierarchy of theology is reversed. Only through incarnation in a human being and the enjoyment of a human freedom, the freedom that comes to the contingent and the created, can the divine achieve salvation. But the freedom that we enjoy is conditional on our mortality. Death lies at the heart of the moral community, and love is a relation between dying things. But love also includes, in its highest form, a recognition and acceptance of death. Redemption, therefore, for the gods as much as for us, lies in love and in the exalted acceptance of death that love makes possible.

But it is not death itself that is the redemption. Death acquires this meaning only when conceived, so to speak, under the aspect of love—only when part of an all-comprehending act of renunciation, inspired by love. The theme of redemption *(Erlösung),* and of the inseparable connection between redemption, love, and death, runs through the late Wagner operas and has led many commentators to see these works as religious or quasi-religious. Michael Tanner has even described *Tristan und Isolde* as one of "the two greatest religious works of art of our culture" (the other being the *St. Matthew Passion*).[10] At the same time, with the exception of *Parsifal* and *Die Meistersinger,* the late operas make no reference to the Christian faith, show the gods to be unworthy fictions, and eschew all hope of eternal life. Brünnhilde promises a glorious afterlife to Siegmund; but the place to which he is to go, Valhalla, is scheduled for demolition. Tristan and Isolde embrace death as "holy night," the kingdom of forgetting, the place where individuality is at last extinguished in a

blissful but final surcease. To approach these late operas in the right spirit, therefore, we must try to understand what redemption could mean, when detached from every promise of a life after death.

In the chapters that follow I give an account of *Tristan und Isolde* as a work of music drama. My aim is to show what it means, how it means, and why its meaning is important. And in the course of my argument I shall have things to say about the nature of tragedy, about the significance of ritual sacrifice, and about the meaning of redemption. Like any serious critic I shall be measuring Wagner's work against the exacting standards of life: I shall try to lay bear the vision of human life and its significance that Wagner implies or presupposes, and I shall ask whether that vision is available to us, and if so whether it points the way, as Wagner supposed, to a kind of redemption. The path to my conclusion is a winding one, passing through philosophical, musicological, theological, and anthropological territory. My hope is that the themes discussed are of sufficient interest in themselves, and that even those who do not agree with my interpretation of the music drama (which is far from being the only cogent interpretation), will be stimulated to reflect on the themes that it has brought to my mind.

TWO

The Story of Tristan

Wagner's medieval world was not a pre-Raphaelite dream in which to escape from modern realities, but a stage to be filled with believable people. He was in search of the universal, the timeless—and therefore the modern. And his uncompromising modernity as an artist led him, paradoxically, to sympathize with the medieval view of what we are. Wagner belittled the episodic and unfocused character of the medieval epics, and in his early polemic *Art and Revolution,* written in Paris in the wake of the 1848 revolutions, he took the literature of chivalry to task for its Christianized hypocrisy.[1] But he was also drawn to the chivalric code. He saw, beneath the arbitrary encrustation of adventures and conventions, a profound attempt to reconcile heroic action with erotic passion. The chivalric background to the tale of Tristan and Isolde is therefore preserved in Wagner's version—less as an observable fact than as a subjective atmosphere, a shared but largely unspoken sense of what matters and why.

The Tristan legend itself, however, predates the age of chivalry, probably by many centuries. The legend is generally thought to be of Celtic origin, entering medieval literature from the Breton *lais.* "Tristan" is the Cornish "Drystan," name of one of three Celtic divinities of love, or maybe the Pictish "Drostan."[2] The medieval chroniclers give a fanciful Latinate etymology for the name, deriving it from the hero's *tristesse,* an attribute that preceded his fatal enchantment with Isolde, and that remained through all his many adventures. In fact Tristan already has, in the old legend, the characteristics of the Wagnerian hero. Like Siegfried he is an orphan, with a father slain before his birth and a mother who died,

brokenhearted, in childbed. Again like Siegfried, Tristan is without children, consumed by a love that has no reproductive goal and whose meaning lies entirely in the obsessive bond between lovers. Tristan is severed at both ends from the chain of reproduction. His story is that of a modern antihero—a knight and huntsman, certainly, but also a wandering minstrel, thrown into the world without explanation, destined to live in a foreign court, to fight foreign battles, to love a foreign queen, and to be everywhere a foreigner to the laws and precepts of normal human society. Tristan has been described as the first *"amant sentimentale"*;[3] it would be more in keeping with Wagner's understanding of the legend to describe him as the first outsider.

Wagner's principal source was Gottfried von Strassburg, who wrote his *Tristan und Îsôt* at the beginning of the thirteenth century, at a time when chivalry was being taught to the nobility as an expression of the Christian way of life. However, Wagner was also familiar with other versions of the legend, two of which were published in the edition of Gottfried's poem that he possessed.[4] These two were the fragment in French by the poet Béroul, of whom nothing further is known, and the Middle English *Sir Tristrem,* discovered in 1806 by Sir Walter Scott in an Edinburgh library, and for a while thought to be the original source of the Tristan poems. Wagner also certainly knew the sixteenth-century tragedy of Tristrant and Isalden by the minnesinger Hans Sachs, if only because he had taken Sachs as the central character in *Die Meistersinger,* conceived long before *Tristan und Isolde.* Sachs's play consists of a series of tableaux in verse, with little connection or development. It is of considerable interest nevertheless for its attempt to convey the deep melancholy of the story. It is also the only known version, prior to Wagner, for the stage.

Gottfried, like Wagner, looked back to earlier writings, and wished both to capture the moral essence of the story contained in them and also to modernize the characters and to give credence to their states of mind. He wrote under the influence of the literature of "courtly love," and also at a time when the church was beginning to define marriage as a sacrament, so raising the question of whether marriage could be valid without some divinely sanctioned and even predestined love between the partners. The legend of Tristan and Isolde therefore enabled Gottfried to ex-

plore a phenomenon—erotic love—that had become the subject of intense moral, religious, and political interrogation.

Gottfried's immediate source was the courtly *Tristran* of the twelfth-century Anglo-Norman poet Thomas of Brittany (also known as Thomas d'Angleterre), who practiced his art at the court of King Henry II of England. Henry's wife, the flamboyant Eleanor of Aquitaine, was granddaughter of William IX of Aquitaine, the first troubadour. Poets from every region of the kingdom could find protection under Eleanor, and the extensive dominions of the Anglo-Norman kings meant that Provençal, French, Breton, Irish, Welsh, and English materials were all mingled in the literature that she patronized. It has been plausibly said that Eleanor's court was the crucible in which the medieval ideals of knighthood, love, and marriage were fused.[5] It is probable that the great Chrétien de Troyes, poet of the Grail legends, spent some time at the court, and probable too that he composed there a version, now lost, of the Tristan story.[6]

Contemporary with Thomas's *Tristran,* and probably influenced by it, was the first epic devoted to Troilus and Cressida—the *Roman de Troie* by Benoît de Sainte-Maure, a priest at Eleanor's court. This story, with its famous love triangle, explored the ideas of sexual sanctity and sexual desecration that shaped the legend of Tristan. Two later versions—the *Filostrato* of Boccaccio and the *Troilus and Criseyde* of Chaucer—are among the most refined explorations in literature of chivalric ideals and their corruption by the real world of human sentiment. Chaucer described his own poem as a tragedy—so introducing that Greek word (which he took from Boethius) for the first time into the English language. And in both the Tristan narratives and the Troilus poems we find medieval writers feeling their way toward the mysterious connection between erotic love and death—between *eros* and *thanatos*—that is finally brought into the open by Wagner.

Ever since the term was first coined by Gaston Paris in 1883, "courtly love" *(l'amour courtois)* has been the object of unremitting literary and philosophical controversy.[7] This controversy has a critical bearing both on Gottfried's poem and on Wagner's music drama, and it is well to be familiar with its outlines. The courtly literature of the Middle Ages forms a highly distinctive tradition, with a style, a manner, and an atmosphere

all its own. Many critics therefore suppose that the love it examines is a local artifact whose peculiarities cannot be generalized to all mankind.[8] Gottfried, like Wagner, was of the opposite persuasion, believing that the story of Tristan contains vital insights into the universal essence of sexual love. But the courtly influence on Gottfried, which survives in Wagner, might lead us to dismiss Gottfried's claims as parochial, shaped by a unique and never-to-be-repeated culture whose "eternal truths" re-emerge, in our skeptical vantage point, as the transitory illusions of a vanished age.

Courtly love poetry began in Provence in the twelfth century and subsequently migrated north, aided by Eleanor of Aquitaine's adventurous affairs and marriages (first to King Louis VII of France, subsequently, following divorce, to King Henry II of England). The language and conventions of this poetry reflect the peculiar social circumstances of twelfth-century Provence, in which aristocratic wives held court among their troubadour admirers, each of the latter vying for the attention of his lady. The lady would compensate for the privations of her arranged marriage by bestowing first her courtesy and then her love on the knight who best pleased her with his virtues, whether in arms or in song. Although physical consummation of this love was never ruled out, neither was it clearly endorsed, even by those writers who believed that adultery stood higher in the scheme of things than marriage.

One peculiarity of the early Provençal poems is that the lady is always addressed in the masculine gender as *midons*—"my lord"—a practice also found in Hispano-Arabic love poetry of the tenth and eleventh centuries. This is one piece of evidence for the view that the literature of courtly love has its roots not in Christian Provence but in Muslim Spain.[9] But it also suggests an undercurrent of mystical adoration, which sees through the object of love to the higher realm of *eros*. In this higher realm the lady is divested of her physical incarnation and reconstituted as a divinity: by referring to her in the masculine gender the poet discards, so to speak, the feminine sex. This mystical tendency reflects the Neoplatonic input into medieval literature, both Latin and Arabic.

In a now famous treatment of the topic, Denis de Rougemont sought to establish a psychological affinity between courtly love and the con-

temporary Cathar (Albigensian) heresy in Provence, and connected *eros* and *thanatos* in a manner heavily influenced by Freud's theory of the death wish.[10] According to de Rougemont, the essence of courtly love lies not in the sweet courtesies that surround and elevate the lady, but in the fact that she is forbidden. Since only passion can break through the barrier that protects her, passion becomes both necessary and justified. Thus was established the enduring theme of romantic eroticism, which shaped the culture of the West, and made "passion-love," as Stendhal was to call it, a fundamental but subversive force in Western society, celebrated in countless stories of forbidden sexual attraction from Lancelot's desire for Queen Guinevere to Humbert Humbert's obsession with the nymphet Lolita (an example likened by de Rougemont in subsequent writings to the love of Tristan and Isolde, both being instances of "the Tristan myth"[11]).

De Rougemont's vision of courtly love is as culture-bound as the phenomenon he describes, and reflects the post-Wagnerian, postsymbolist, and psychoanalytical culture of the *entre deux guerres.* Courtly love was not in fact regarded either in Provençal society or in the subsequent literature as a subversive force. On the contrary, it was esteemed as an idealization of the sexual impulse, which contributed to social stability by subduing male rivalries under a code of honor. Courtly rituals were designed to reshape carnal lust as a form of rational obedience to the sovereign lady. The crucial element was not the forbidden consummation but the elaborate courtesies that either preceded or (more probably) replaced it. As Irving Singer puts it, courtliness enabled the lover "to breach the sanctuary of another's separate being without storming it,"[12] and the most striking feature of the greatest celebrations of courtly love in high medieval literature—the *Vita nuova* of Dante, the sonnets of Petrarch, the *Parliament of Fowles* of Chaucer, and Gower's *Confessio Amantis*—is the emphasis on virtuous living and sexual restraint, and the frequent subsumption of sexual love under the wider cult of the Virgin.

Modern readers of courtly literature are also likely to be struck by its emphasis on procedures. The respect shown to chastity goes hand in hand with a legalistic approach to the transactions that might or might not precede the loss of it. The Provençal poems speak of courts of love, to which the lady or the lover bring their petitions in order to ascertain who has

best served the cause of Love, and who deserves the prize. The treatise *De arte honesti amandi* of Andreas Capellanus, a contemporary and friend of Chrétien de Troyes, offers imaginary dialogues for the use of lovers who, though separated by rank and fortune, will be able to make use of Andreas's arguments to present their case, as though in a court of law.[13] Andreas's inspiration was Ovid's *Art of Love,* a book that was a favorite among medieval readers despite its scurrilous approach to its subject.[14] Andreas followed Ovid in giving rules and stratagems for the pursuit of amorous ends. But not only were the ends very different (lasting spiritual union, rather than momentary sexual pleasure), but the means for achieving them were in many ways the opposite of those favored by Ovid. The Roman poet sanctioned every trick, subterfuge, lie, or flattery that could achieve the carnal purpose; but, as his title implies, Andreas saw love and desire as occasions for honest dealing, as schools for virtue, and as motives to obtain another's love by first deserving it. Courtly love was conceived as a kind of service to the lady, who was wooed not by displays of passion but by virtuous deeds, acts of obedience, and self-sacrificing labors directed at enhancing her esteem.

This erotic legalism characterizes the medieval literature of love right down to Renaissance writers like Malory and Spenser. Love is seen not as an expression of animal desire, but as a rational choice, conferred on the one who is worthy of it. This choice is a distinguishing mark of our condition, made as we are in God's image. The "court of love" is an allegorical representation of this fact, and the purpose of courtesy is to delay sexual union, if not indefinitely, at least to the point where it is embraced wholly and completely, by a desire that emerges from and is schooled by the rational faculty.[15] Just as man must be educated from animal into rational being, so must sex be educated from desire into love. So understood, erotic love is not an instinct that we share with the animals but an act of free choice, in which individuals come together eternally.[16]

In this brief survey I have touched on several themes that should be borne in mind in considering Gottfried's version of the legend of Tristan. Gottfried was not dealing with a plain case of adultery, conceived as forbidden love. Like Wagner, he was concerned with idealization and courtesy; with the place of reason and choice in the workings of sexual desire;

and with renunciation as one of the recurring burdens of erotic love. His poem is part of a cultural enterprise of which we too are heirs, which is the attempt, through art, literature and religion, to shape human sexual love as a form of sacrament. In the allegory of the love philter he captured the skeptical thought that generations of courtly poets strove in vain to banish—the thought that desire is, after all, not a rational choice but a bodily destiny.

Gottfried never finished his story, perhaps because the by-then traditional ending—in which Tristan betrays his love—was not to his liking. Gottfried's poem was continued later in the thirteenth century in two versions, by Ulrich von Türheim and Heinrich von Freiberg. Other Tristan texts exist in French, Norwegian, Icelandic, Franconian, Italian, German, English, Russian, and Czech, and it seems that the tale was not merely much told but much marred in the telling, with the jongleurs, troubadours, and minnesingers bringing together at least three separate sources.[17] Gottfried von Strassburg's 20,000 lines break off at the point where the concluding fragment of Thomas's poem (of which only 3,000 lines survive) begins. Taken together, however, Thomas and Gottfried tell a complete story, and their version provides the principal themes upon which later poets digressed.

Gottfried lived in the ecclesiastical city of Strassburg, which was at the time a thriving merchant community. Little trace of this bourgeois background can be discerned in his poem, either because Gottfried is being deliberately archaic in his invocations of the old Celtic kingdoms, or because he himself was a knight rather than a burgher. It is evident that Gottfried, like Tristan, was an accomplished huntsman and horseman, and hunting with hounds forms a kind of refrain to the poem—a feature that gave Wagner the cue for his second act. Gottfried's Tristan, like many a Celtic hero, is a minstrel, versed in the Celtic, Germanic, and Latin languages spoken in Britain and France. And his omnicompetence, which makes him at home in every court, is also a kind of nomadism, making him a stranger everywhere.

For the noble audiences of Gottfried's day, therefore, the Tristan story was both a drama of courtly love and a reminder of the fragility of their courtly settlements. Like the Green Knight in *Gawain,* Tristan is a visitor

from archaic times, the ghost of the hunter-gatherer returning to haunt the land. He teaches the rituals and ceremonies of the hunt to the courtiers, who are amazed and perplexed by his competence. He disturbs the court with the spectacle of an untamed oneness with nature, the sign and symbol of which is his illicit love for the queen. Time and again Tristan proves necessary for the survival of the Cornish people, but his constant arrivals and departures on missions for the common good serve merely to emphasize the vulnerability of their castellated existence. Meanwhile the whole feudal order is undermined from within by his insatiable desire for Queen Îsôt and hers for him. In presenting this deeply threatening character as nevertheless the summit of knightly virtue, wholly deserving of Îsolt's love, and tragically doomed because of it, poets such as Gottfried were engaged in a profound examination of courtly morality, of marriage, and of the sacramental character of erotic love.

Here, in briefest outline, is the story as Wagner would have known it from his sources:

Mark, king of Cornwall, is aided in his wars by Rivalin, king of Parmenie (or perhaps of Lohnois, Lyonesse).[18] During his time at the court of King Mark, Rivalin falls in love with Mark's sister Blanchefleur, who reciprocates his love and, becoming pregnant, flees with Rivalin when the latter is called home to defend his territory. Rivalin is slain in battle and Blanchefleur, by now cared for by the faithful marshal Rual, is married to Rivalin on his deathbed. She promptly gives birth to a son whom she calls Tristan and whom, dying, she entrusts to Rual's care. The marshal passes off the boy as his own and gives him to be brought up by Gorvenal or Curvenal, a trusty squire. (In Gottfried's version the trusty Curvenal enters the story only later, as a squire appointed by King Mark.)[19]

One day the boy is captured by Norwegian merchants and carried off to sea. A storm arises and, fearing divine retribution, the merchants set their captive adrift in a skiff, which carries him to Cornwall. Tristan's beauty, courtesy, and accomplishments endear him to King Mark and his court. Rual eventually traces the boy and comes to Cornwall to claim him, since Tristan must return to defend his ancestral territory. King Mark learns from Rual that Tristan is his nephew, a fact that increases his love for the boy and his longing for Tristan's return. Out of loyalty to King

Mark Tristan does return to Cornwall, having rid Parmenie of the usurper and having handed the country over to Rual as his lieutenant.

Tristan finds Cornwall in deep grief, since it is the time when 300 noble youths and 300 maidens must be sent to serfdom in Ireland as tribute to the Irish king. The emissary is Morold, an invincible giant and brother of Queen Isolt of Ireland.[20] Tristan challenges Morold to single combat. Morold wounds Tristan with his poisoned sword and—in Gottfried's version—informs Tristan that only Queen Isolt, skilled in magic arts, could heal the wound. Tristan then slays Morold and insolently sends the head back to Ireland as "tribute," with a fragment of his sword embedded in the skull.

Tristan—whose festering wound renders him both helpless and repulsive—sets sail with a baronial escort to Ireland, and is again put ashore in a skiff, taking with him only his harp, with which he charms his way to the queen's presence, passing himself off as "Tantris," a traveling minstrel. She uses her magic arts to heal the musician who meanwhile becomes tutor to her daughter, Isolt the Fair. Tristan's great accomplishments, courtesy, and knowledge charm the young princess, who is a willing pupil. Once healed, however, Tristan urges that he must depart, to the great disappointment of both the queen and her daughter.

Mark has made Tristan his heir and thereby aroused the jealousy of his nobles. (The barons who had accompanied "Tantris" to Ireland were perhaps already intent on his death, which is why they put him ashore unarmed on hostile territory.) To counter their malicious insinuations, Tristan offers to woo the fair Princess Isolt for King Mark, so securing a match that would bring lasting peace to their warring kingdoms. In some versions, including that of Hans Sachs, Mark is led to this plan by a bird that brings a thread of golden hair to him, so exciting his desire and prompting Tristan to recollect the golden-haired Isolt. (Gottfried does not mention this episode, but concentrates instead on the social and political constraints that govern Mark's decision.) Tristan sets sail again to Ireland, disguised as a merchant.

The king of Ireland has promised the hand of Isolt the Fair to the person who could rid his kingdom of a fearful dragon. Tristan kills the dragon and cuts out its tongue; but the combined effect of his battle weariness

and the vapor from the poisoned tongue prove too much for the hero, who falls to the ground unconscious. Meanwhile the queen's steward, in love with the fair Isolt, finds the dead dragon, cuts off its head as proof of his prowess, and returns to court to claim the princess as prize. Horrified and suspecting the steward's deception, the princess sets out with her faithful maid Brangaene to search for the dragon's lair. There they discover the still unconscious Tristan with the dragon's tongue clutched to his breast. They carry him back to the castle, and the queen once again heals him with her magic arts.

The next day, the young princess is anointing Tristan in his bath, unaware, like the queen, of his identity, though in some versions guessing that he is her former tutor Tantris. She is absorbed in appreciating his beauty, when he opens his eyes and smiles at her. What is the meaning of this smile? Perhaps, Isolt reflects, the unknown knight is reminding her of some duty that she owes him as guest, and in consternation she goes off to polish his armor. (Gottfried is delightfully unsure of Isolt's motives here; what he does know is that Isolt is disconcerted by her guest, and that she responds in a confused but womanly way by performing a hospitable service for him.[21])

While cleaning Tristan's sword, Isolt notices a gap in the blade into which she fits the splinter taken from the head of Morold, so discovering her guest's true identity. She rushes in to kill Tristan but is again overcome by womanly feeling and, in consultation with the queen and Brangaene, renounces her purpose, allowing Tristan to be their friend. Despite this reconciliation—very necessary if Isolt is not to be sacrificed to the scheming steward—something makes the young woman's antipathy still smolder within her. The court assembles to hear the steward's claim to Isolt, which he justifies by producing the dragon's head. Tristan steps forward with the tongue and challenges the steward to prove himself in battle. The steward backs down, whereupon Tristan, revealing his identity, asks for the hand of Isolt not for himself—though twice he has won her, once through Morold, once through the dragon—but for King Mark, as a pledge of lasting peace between their kingdoms. Seeing the wisdom of this proposal, the Irish king consents, and Isolt sets sail with Tristan for Cornwall.

As Isolt embarks, the queen entrusts the faithful Brangaene with a potent philter that she has brewed, the effect of which will be to cause those who drink it to love each other henceforth with all their soul and all their senses, in life and in death. In this way, she hopes, Isolt will take joy in her marriage to Mark, the king likewise, and the alliance between Cornwall and Ireland will be lastingly secured.

During the journey Isolt broods on the wrong that Tristan has done her—by killing Morold, by taking her from her home, and most of all by not claiming her for himself but carrying her humiliated as booty to a stranger. She repulses Tristan's attempts to soothe her and—although Gottfried never explicitly dwells on this—it is clear that there is more to her antipathy than the causes given. On a sultry day Tristan and Isolt call for wine, and an ignorant serving maid, discovering the philter, gives it to them. There follows in Gottfried a long and beautiful description of the torment that the two then feel, as love battles with honor and desire with shame. Brangaene, discovering what has happened, reveals to the lovers the nature of their predicament, whereupon they give way to their passion, to become one in soul and body to the end of time. (In some versions of the legend, the love philter acts only for a finite time—three or four years—after which the lovers are released from its grip.)

On arriving in Cornwall, the lovers engage in a series of subterfuges, hoping to allay the suspicions of King Mark. These episodes, which form the substance of Gottfried's narrative, hardly endear the lovers to the modern reader. Brangaene is persuaded to impersonate Isolt on Mark's bridal night, so losing her virginity to a man whom she does not love. Isolt then conceives a hatred for Brangaene and plots to have her murdered—though the plot is foiled. Isolt even sets out to deceive the Almighty in a trial by ordeal in which she swears true words with a false meaning (a ruse that, Gottfried comments, presumes very far on God's courtesy—*gotes höverscheit*). The lovers are also banished from the court and, in one of the most beautiful of Gottfried's intaglios, install themselves in a grotto of love until discovered by a royal hunting party in postures sufficiently ambiguous to provoke Mark's suspicions and at the same time to cast doubt on them. (The grotto of love occurs in other versions of the Tristan story. It is the *locus amoenus,* the idyllic grove of Venus and Nature, which recurs

throughout medieval literature as the idealized scene of a divinely ordered erotic union.[22])

The ruses are at last in vain, and Tristan, betrayed by the jealous courtiers and by the envious dwarf Melot, is obliged to flee to Brittany. There he languishes without news of Isolt and imagines that she has forgotten him. This development affords Thomas an opportunity (lines 135–234) to portray Tristan's sexual jealousy and to reflect on the torment of a lover compelled to view himself as one among a plurality of substitutes—a theme central to the Troilus literature. Since the Breton duke, whom he has helped in his wars, offers his daughter—Isolt of the White Hands—in marriage, Tristan accepts, having worked himself up into a kind of artificial love for this substitute Isolt and hoping to use her to blot out the memory of her predecessor.

Tristan goes through with the marriage to Isolt of the White Hands, but then, recalling his real love for Isolt the Fair, finds himself unable to consummate it. Instead he goes back in disguise to Cornwall to carry on his dangerous affair. Tristan's wretchedness, as he contrives—disguised now as a visiting diplomat, now as a merchant, now as a beggar—to waylay the Queen, is vividly described by Thomas. Eventually Tristan is forced to flee for the last time, and Isolt the Fair swears that she will come to him when he calls for her.

Tristan is again wounded with a poisoned sword and sends his friend Kaherdin, brother of Isolt of the White Hands, to Cornwall, asking him to hoist a white sail on his ship should he return with Isolt the Fair, and a black sail should it be otherwise. This conversation is overheard by Isolt of the White Hands, who, now understanding her predicament, swears vengeance on Tristan and on the woman who has captured his heart. When the ship returns she falsely announces to her dying husband that it carries a black sail, whereupon Tristan turns to the wall, utters three times the name of Isolt, and expires. Isolt the Fair finds the dead Tristan, takes him in her arms, and pressing mouth to mouth, body to body, and soul to soul, joins him in death.

According to a later French version of the story, Mark, hearing of the death of the lovers, sails to Brittany, has their tombs opened, and brings back their bodies to Tintagel, where he buries them on either side of the

chapel. When night falls there springs from Tristan's grave a briar that flings its branches across the roof and sinks them into the tomb of Isolt. Three times it is cut down and three times it grows again, until Mark forbids that the briar be touched. (In another version, to which Wagner refers in his correspondence with Mathilde Wesendonck and elsewhere, ivy grows from Tristan's grave to embrace the vine that grows from the grave of Isolt.)

It is evident that this story of Tristan was cobbled together from three or more tales: a tale of dragon-slaying, a tale of war and tribute, and a tale of a love potion and its dire results. Themes and images (the poisoned sword, the skiff, the journey to Ireland, the faithful squire, the beauty called Isolt, and her healing powers) are repeated or varied in a chain of mutually irrelevant episodes, and it is no small triumph on Wagner's part to have extracted the dramatic essence from this farrago and used it to create such a telling invocation of a world already projected into an imaginary prehistory by Gottfried.

Gottfried himself was obsessed by the lovers and their fate, exploring all the ruses and adventures into which they were led by their passion and using their predicament to reflect on the nature of love in verse of admirable melodiousness and clarity. His poem is rightly esteemed, for all its quirks, as the earliest epic masterpiece in German, linking passages of great lyrical beauty through a narrative that is full of charm. His rhymed octosyllabic couplets never tire and have something of the freshness of Chrétien de Troyes, whose version of the Grail legend had such a profound effect on the course of medieval literature.

Although he does not explicitly say so, Gottfried evidently regards the lovers as destined for each other even before the potion has bound them in life and death. Moreover, he regards them as both destroyed by their love and also morally exalted by it, so that their appalling lies and subterfuges are in some way excusable. Indeed, this is perhaps what is most remarkable in Gottfried's poem: Tristan and Isolt are represented as elevated by their love to a metaphysical condition that removes them completely from the laws and customs of the surrounding order. They address each other in noble and courteous language, even while betraying

the most solemn vows and sacred rules of conduct. Their crimes are thrust upon them by something more holy than the laws that they violate. For their love has made them one, and this unity of two beings excuses every ruse toward a world that would divide them. At times Gottfried anticipates the metaphysical language that Wagner would use to portray the lovers' predicament. After they drink the potion, they become "united in love, transparent to each other as a mirror":

> *mit liebe alsô vereinet,*
> *daz ietweder dem andern was*
> *durchlûter alse ein spiegelglas.*
> (11728–11730)

And Isolt, when she finally relinquishes Tristan, addresses him thus:

> *nu gât her unde küsset mich:*
> *Tristan und Îsôt, ir und ich,*
> *wir zwei sîn iemer beide*
> *ein ding ân' underscheide.*
> *dirre kus sol ein insigel sîn,*
> *daz ich iuwer under ir mîn*
> *belîben staete unz an den tôt,*
> *niwan ein Tristan und ein Îsôt.*
> (18355–18362)

(Now come here and kiss me. Tristan and Isolt, you and I, we two are ever one thing and undivided. Let this kiss be a seal that I am yours and you mine, steadfast till death, but one Tristan and one Isolt.)

There is a bitter irony in these words. For as the next episode recounts, there is one Tristan but two Isolts. And Tristan deserves death at last. For he falls into the great sin against love, which is to regard the object of love not as unique, irreplaceable, and predestined, but as amenable to substitution. In the beautiful episode when Tristan and Isolt first avow their love, Gottfried breaks off from the narrative to rail against the abuse of love, in which the sexual bond becomes a mere commodity and the name of love a marketing device: "Love, mistress of all hearts, the noble, the incomparable, is for sale in the open market. What shameful dues our do-

minion has extorted from her! We have set a false stone in our ring and now deceive ourselves with it. . . ." (lines 12304 et seq.) And throughout the poem Gottfried contrasts Tristan's love for Isolt with Mark's. The king desires Isolt, and he fears for his honor and authority if his nephew is suspected of cuckolding him. But his love is a species of concupiscence rather than the oneness of a substantial tie. Hence, in a deep sense, he has no right to Isolt, and her heart is free to bestow elsewhere.[23] These metaphysical thoughts about love later find profound expression in Wagner.

Gottfried's episodic style and love of vivid detail lead him to what modern writers would regard as a great artistic failing, which is the neglect of character. Instead of using episodes to build and enhance the character of his hero and heroine, he leaves the lovers for page after page hazy and undefined, like bit parts in a minor film. Only in the episodes that frame their passion are they truly real; and for many readers the inconsistency between the praise that Gottfried lavishes on their virtues and the sordid subterfuges with which they deceive the king undermines their credibility. Without going into the question of Gottfried's intentions, however, we can excuse him on the grounds that the inconsistency belongs in part to the lovers themselves. In a certain measure he is offering us a realistic portrait of two noble people in the grip of a passion that sweeps all moral constraint away and leaves them helpless and broken in the face of destiny. Love of one's sovereign lady, which in the courtly literature brings an idealized and Platonic release from the things of this world, brings chaos, wretchedness, and death to Tristan. Through the story of Tristan, therefore, medieval readers could discern both the power of the courtly ideal and the human reality that subverts it.

That is how Wagner too saw the central drama. In a program note for a concert that included the Prelude to *Tristan und Isolde,* Wagner described his opera as a tale of "endless yearning, longing, the bliss and wretchedness of love; world, power, fame, honor, chivalry, loyalty and friendship all blown away like an insubstantial dream; one thing alone left living—longing, longing unquenchable, a yearning, a hunger, a languishing forever renewing itself; one sole redemption—death, surcease, a sleep without awakening."[24] But Wagner goes further than Gottfried, and answers the question that is surely in the forefront of the minds of Gottfried's and

Thomas's modern readers, which is: why don't Tristan and Isolt *do* something? That is to say—why don't they escape from their impossible situation? Wagner completes the thought that is adumbrated by Gottfried—that they can indeed escape, but only through death. All other avenues are closed to them, since all other avenues will compromise their love.

This is what explains the importance, for Wagner, of the medieval and chivalric setting. Tristan and Isolt do not belong to a world in which kings can sue for divorce, or queens set up house with one of their subjects. Theirs is not a world in which adulterous lovers can make public display of their passion and expect to survive. The marriage vows that bind Isolt create a tie that is both personal and political, and the safety of the realm depends upon honoring those vows—or, at any rate, appearing to honor them. Every social and moral law forbids the bond between Isolt and Tristan, and it is only because of this that the supreme force of their love becomes apparent. We encounter here the theme of romantic literature that fascinated Denis de Rougemont: the strength of illicit love. This is the way in which passion can be dramatized—namely by forbidding it. The inexorable need for union then becomes a predestined move toward death.

Wagner, however, wished to go further, and to use this elemental plot as a foil for his idiosyncratic conception of love. In Wagner's worldview death is not merely a way out for forbidden love but a fulfillment of erotic love *even in its permitted forms.* This mystical thought can be dramatized but not easily explained—though later I shall attempt to put it in more prosaic terms. The audience must encounter the sacrificial moment, in which the union of love and death redeems the lovers. To make this dramatic idea plausible Wagner reduces the story to its elements, endowing the protagonists with the greatest possible distinctness as characters, and then showing their willing submission to their fate. He takes three episodes as the pillars of the drama: the drinking of the love potion on board the ship that is bringing Isolt to Cornwall; the discovery of the lovers by the royal hunting party; and the arrival of Isolt by sea, summoned by the dying Tristan. It is astonishing to discover how much of the old story Wagner is able to build into these three primal episodes, while presenting unforgettable characters imprisoned by a thoroughly believable situation.

The opera acquaints us with all of the following: Tristan's orphan origins and ineffable sadness; his relationship to King Mark and position as presumptive (matrilineal) heir; the tribute claimed by Morold (in Wagner's version the betrothed, rather than the uncle, of Isolt the Fair); Tristan's killing of Morold and receipt of the poisoned wound; the journey of Tristan-Tantris to Ireland and his healing by the queen; Isolt's care for the invalid, discovery of the notched sword, and thwarted desire for revenge; Tristan's return to Cornwall and his subsequent reappearance in Ireland as suitor on King Mark's behalf; Isolt's enduring anger and its secret cause; Brangaene's special relationship with Isolt, and Curvenal's with Tristan; the love potion and the impossibility of openly obeying its command; the dangerous decision to meet nevertheless; the jealousy of the courtiers (represented by Melot); the royal hunting party and the mystical union of the lovers that it interrupts; Mark's just grievance and the code of chivalry that compels it; Tristan's flight across the sea (in Wagner, a return to his native Kareol in Brittany); Tristan's lying wounded far from Isolt; Isolt's crossing the sea at Tristan's summons; Tristan's breathing of her name as he dies; the union of the lovers in death; and Mark's forgiveness. In short, everything in the old romance that is relevant to the drama of passion is retained by Wagner, brilliantly condensed into three acts in most of which nothing physical happens! Furthermore Wagner removes the inconsistencies and vapidities from the old story and introduces elements that heighten its dramatic impact. The result is a unified drama, every note and every word of which contributes to the sustained and unforgettable atmosphere.[25]

The first act of the opera is devoted to Isolde, the third to Tristan, and the second to their love. This symmetrical structure is meticulously carried over into the details of the plot. The first act takes place on the sea, the third act by the shore of the sea, and both are full of the atmosphere of the sea and its message of separation. The second act takes place on land and is set against a royal hunt—that is, an activity affirming the land as a possession, a place of human settlement and dominion. But the lovers manifestly do not belong here: they are creatures of the sea—of the boundless, formless, lawless sea of destiny, from which true love emerges only to yearn unceasingly for its oceanic home. They are visitors

from a transcendental realm, and the bustle of the world and all its laws remain strange to them and unintelligible.

This transcendental realm exists in Gottfried. His *locus amoenus* in the forest is detached from the landscape, in a world apart. It is a sacred precinct, a temple, and the lovers' bed an altar; they address each other there in hushed, liturgical words, and they live from love alone, wanting no other nourishment. Love, Gottfried implies, is their Eucharist. Many medieval writers had tried to dignify erotic love in this way—Dante in *Vita nuova* and the *Paradiso,* Chaucer in the *Book of the Duchess* and *The Knight's Tale,* Boccaccio, Alain de l'Isle, Petrarch, and many more. For the most part, however, these medieval visions of transcendental love were also celebrations of chastity: the beloved is inaccessible, and spiritualized because inaccessible. Dante's Beatrice is a child when he meets her, and his love for her is never consummated except in a mystical form when she guides him through the realm of Paradise. Petrarch's Laura is a child bride, but bride of another and therefore untouchable. Gottfried is unusual in attaching the sacred attributes of divine worship to an insatiable physical desire. As for Wagner, it is hotly disputed whether his Tristan and Isolde consummate their passion; but the question is strangely made irrelevant by the drama, which translates their love out of the realm of ordinary things so completely as to make it impossible to attach it to any clear earthly purpose. Many of the medieval writers (Andreas Capellanus included) had advocated coitus interruptus as the only form of carnal union compatible with the higher aim of courtly love. And the love music of Wagner's second act can certainly be heard as such a quasi consummation. But, as the final *Liebestod* reveals, the true consummation is neither in nor of this world. Tristan and Isolde's love seeks a consummation not in life but in death, and it is a complete consummation, in that neither Tristan nor Isolde survives it.

Indeed it was not until Wagner that the love-Eucharist came fully to life as a dramatic idea. Wagner's lovers are carried into their otherworldly realm by music, and music of supreme dramatic power, whose movement toward inextricable union is accomplished not with words or concepts but by a mysterious harmonic logic emblematic of the indescribable force that governs them. The words that the lovers sing in act 2 are elab-

orations on the theme of metaphysical union as adumbrated by Gottfried, but taken by themselves they are almost nonsensical, a kind of breathless incantation that weaves itself around the notes as though digressing upon and ornamenting their core of unsayable sense. And yet even in this highest of romantic rhapsodies there survives an indescribable essence of the original idea—a distillation of the social, moral, and religious context in which the story of this incandescent love was first received as believable.

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THREE

Wagner's Treatment of the Story

Wagner's three acts focus on three climactic moments: that of the first avowal of love, at the very moment when Isolde is to be given in marriage to King Marke; that of the betrayal by Melot and the discovery of Tristan and Isolde by the royal hunting party; and that of the death and transfiguration of the lovers. In each of these moments Tristan and Isolde vow to die and attempt to do so; only in the last do they succeed. Everything superfluous to this central narrative is removed. Melot the dwarf and the hostile entourage of envious courtiers are condensed into Melot the jealous friend and rival, symbol of Tristan's alienation from the world of honor and of courtly success. Morold the brother of the Irish queen becomes Morold the betrothed of the young Princess Isolde, symbol of her high political status and her royal servitude. The poisoned wounds become one, not two, and the magic arts of Ireland's queen are shared by her namesake and daughter. Finally, King Marke is not the sturdy, lascivious overlord of Gottfried's tale, but a saintly, simple figure, acting for the good of his people and so intimidated by the beauty and remoteness of his young queen that he will not consummate their marriage. Marke enters Wagner's drama already disposed toward the path of renunciation that he will eventually choose.

It is important to recognize that the action of the opera begins with the Prelude (actually called *Einleitung* or Introduction in the score). This Prelude weaves together the motives associated with love and with the love-philter (motives 1–10),[1] connecting them melodically, rhythmically, and harmonically in a sustained and spellbinding polyphony. It also in-

troduces key relations, chords, and interrupted cadences that will form the harmonic background to the entire work, affecting the ear unconsciously even when not overtly recognized. The artistic purpose of the Prelude, however, is not to summarize what follows, but to *begin the action,* to set it in motion by purely musical means, so that the drama is already advancing inexorably toward its culmination even before the curtain rises. The Prelude is an essential preparation for the anger of Isolde that is about to burst forth on stage as she, only partly comprehending as yet the cause of her distress, rages against the fate that has brought her across the sea to Cornwall.

The Prelude fades away, modulating to a bleak C minor with an ominous passage in octaves for cellos and basses, derived from the sailor's song that is about to sound from the masthead. The curtain rises to reveal a tentlike enclosure on the foredeck of a ship, where Isolde lies on a couch, her face buried in cushions. Brangäne, holding open a curtain, looks out across the water.[2] From the mast above comes the unaccompanied voice of a young sailor, singing of an Irish girl—perhaps one he has left behind—whose tearful sighs he likens to the wind that fills the sail. This wistful song, famous for the lines that Eliot quotes in *The Waste Land,* is also noteworthy for its wandering tonal center, beginning in a kind of C minor and ending in B-flat major. The orchestra greets the final B-flat with an interrupted cadence, followed promptly by a violent statement of motive 4 (the Look), as Isolde starts up from the couch. This motive offers the clue to Isolde's feelings, as she rails aloud against the song that seems to mock her. We know these feelings because the Prelude has already planted them deep in our consciousness. And by this device Wagner ensures that we, like Isolde, are saturated by an emotion that we have yet to understand.

The motive of Anger (no. 12) sounds in the orchestra and subsides with a tremolando as Isolde distractedly asks Brangäne where they are. Accompanied by motive 11—a phrase from the sailor's song that is henceforth to be identified with the sea, but which is sometimes called the motive of Crossing—Brangäne reports that they are shortly to arrive on land, to which Isolde responds absently, "Which land?" The answer—"Cornwall's verdant strand"—elicits a passionate "Never!" from Isolde,

causing Brangäne to drop the curtain and rush in consternation to her mistress. Isolde launches into a diatribe against her degenerate race for allowing her to be shipped into captivity, against her mother, whose magic powers (the reference to which is accompanied by motive 2) are now used only to make healing potions, and against her fate. She summons the winds to destroy the ship and everyone on board.

Brangäne, deeply alarmed by Isolde's outburst, recalls the princess's failure to say farewell to those she had left behind in Ireland and her cold, mute behavior ever since. She begs her mistress to reveal the secret thoughts that are troubling her, displaying meanwhile the tender feelings that motivate her deep concern. Isolde makes no response to this moving appeal, save to call for air—at which Brangäne draws aside the curtains, revealing the stern of the ship where sailors are working, and where Tristan stares out to sea with folded arms, his trusty vassal Kurwenal reposing like a dog at his feet. The young sailor resumes his song from the masthead, over a tremolando bass.

So ends the first scene—surely a faultless dramatization of an unacknowledged passion, with a concentration, a spareness, and a formal perfection that recall the Racine of *Phèdre*. We are shown the isolation in which Isolde is traveling, severed from the normal life of the ship and antagonized by everything around her; we witness her intense inner turmoil and the anxiety of her devoted companion; we feel the atmosphere of the sea and the wayward, yearning sentiments that are so easily provoked by it; and we are offered an unforgettable portrait of the princess herself. Isolde, we recognize, is not a mythical abstraction, but a vivid, concrete character: a proud, imperious girl, aware of her status and of the indignity done to it, but fatally misperceiving the real cause of her distress. She is already prepared to deal death both to others and to herself, and—because she cannot acknowledge it—she feels her passion as a physical weight rather than an articulate state of mind. We see Isolde also through Brangäne's eyes and learn that she has been deeply loved and is now vastly changed from the child that Brangäne had tended. This clever touch maintains our sympathy for the raging princess, despite her self-centered words and threatening behavior, and prepares us for the pathos of the scene to come.

The sailor's *"Weh, ach wehe, mein Kind!"* gives way to a passage of shuddering tremolandos, built from the two opening motives of the Prelude, as Isolde fixes her eyes on Tristan and sings:

> *Mir erkoren,*
> *mir verloren,*
> *hehr und heil,*
> *kühn und feig!*

("Destined for me, lost to me; noble and proud; brave and cowardly!") The passage culminates in an A-flat triad, introducing motive 13, to which Isolde sings the words *"Todgeweihtes Haupt! Todgeweihtes Herz!"* ("Death-devoted head! Death-devoted heart!") Alice Cleather and Basil Crump, in their early study of *Tristan und Isolde,* make the following remark: "at the word 'Head' Isolde faintly indicates, by her gesture, Tristan; at the word 'Heart' herself."[3] There is no authority for this gesture in Wagner's stage directions, though it is possible that Cleather and Crump are recording a recognized performance tradition. The head is Tristan's—symbol of the rational pursuit of worldly purposes; the heart is Isolde's—symbol of a passion that no reason or worldly purpose can dispel.

The orchestra now collapses to the ominous tremolando with which the scene began. With an uneasy laugh, Isolde asks Brangäne what she thinks of the fellow there. (The word she uses is the contemptuous *"Knecht."*) "Whom do you mean?" asks Brangäne. Isolde indicates Tristan, "the hero who averts his eyes from mine in shame and fear." Brangäne innocently sings the praises of Tristan, whom the world knows as a paragon of knightly virtue. Isolde mockingly tells her that Tristan is avoiding a contest, and bringing a corpse to his king as a bride. "Go and ask him," she adds, "to come to me. He avoids the duty that he owes me, afraid lest his glance should meet mine." Then, with a stately musical gesture, Isolde tells Brangäne to command Tristan into her presence.

Isolde watches as Brangäne walks with downcast eyes past the sailors to the stern of the ship. Kurwenal warns Tristan of an approaching message from Isolde. Tristan starts: "What's that? Isolde?" Then in music of exquisite simplicity and correctness, Tristan receives Brangäne's request and courteously deflects it, saying that, willing though he is to obey every

request from his lady, he cannot leave the helm. Brangäne in desperation repeats Isolde's words of command, thereby provoking the chauvinistic Kurwenal to jump to his feet and give a contemptuous reply. Tristan, he says, is not Isolde's slave, but a free knight who has bestowed on her the crown of Cornwall and England's succession. Go and repeat it, and let a thousand Isoldes rage against it if they will. As Brangäne hurries away, Kurwenal follows up his sally with an improvised ballad, sung at the top of his voice and insultingly recounting the triumph of Tristan over Morold. The ballad ends with the words *"Hei! Unser Held Tristan, / wie der Zins zahlen kann!"*—"Hail to our hero Tristan, who knows how to pay tribute!" The sailors gleefully take up the song as Tristan orders Kurwenal below.

So ends the second scene, in which the character of Kurwenal is as vividly sketched as those of Isolde and Brangäne in the scene before. Although Kurwenal presents himself in a brash diatonic language, epitomized by motive 15, Wagner again deprives his song of a single tonal center. It begins in D minor, changing at once to D major and wandering through mediant and secondary dominant relations to the key of B-flat major. The device of two tonal centers separated by a third is used throughout the opera to uproot and disturb the feelings expressed by the characters, and to show them to be magnetized by one another and in the grip of a shared fate. The rough, simple Kurwenal is therefore portrayed from the beginning as someone already dragged into the orbit of Tristan's destructive passion, and this fact is immediately emphasized by the chorus, as it shouts out his ballad in an unadulterated D major, so contrasting the solid chauvinism of the sailors with the vacillating and already troubled defiance of Kurwenal.[4]

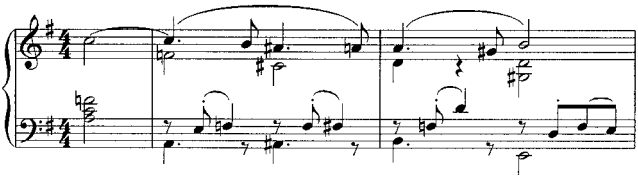
In scene 3 Brangäne returns in humiliation to her mistress and relays Tristan's polite refusal, which Isolde in turn repeats, adding with bitter irony that Tristan is again bringing tribute—this time from Ireland to King Marke. Brangäne begins to summarize Kurwenal's response to Isolde's command, but the princess cuts her short, saying that she overheard every word. "You heard my shame," she adds, "so now hear how it came about." There follows a long and beautiful narrative, based on a subtle modification of the Prelude's opening motive (no. 16, sometimes

known, in this version, as the Sick Tristan motive), in which Isolde recounts the story of Tantris. She tells Brangäne of the frail boat that had once drifted to the Irish coast, containing a man sick to the point of death, who called himself Tantris and who had come to consult the far-famed healing art of the Irish princess. She healed him but, matching the splinter from Morold's head against a notch in his sword, discovered his true identity as Tristan, the slayer of her betrothed.

Throughout this passage Wagner uses the music to yield insight into Isolde's character, while her words convey the dramatic essentials of the story. Each new twist to the story is introduced with an upward rush of indignation that then dies away in pity and tenderness. When Isolde comes to the crucial episode, recounting how she stood over the bed where Tristan lay, his sword raised in her hand, the Sick Tristan motive occurs in the form shown in example 3.1. The string–quartet-like instrumentation here expressly recalls Beethoven at his most tender (in op. 132, last movement), and by placing the viola above the violin and generating the rhythm through the slurred offbeat notes on the cellos, Wagner effectively conveys the weakening of Isolde's hand as she meets Tristan's look.

As Isolde held Tristan's sword above him, she recounts, he looked neither at the sword nor at the hand that was wielding it. Instead he looked into her eyes, a long and penetrating look of love and sorrow, which caused her to lower the sword:

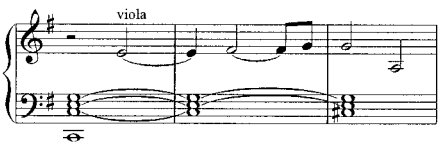
Von seinem Lager
blickt' er her—
nicht auf das Schwert,
nicht auf die Hand—
er sah mir in die Augen.



Example 3.1

("From his couch he glanced up—not at the sword, not at the hand—he looked into my eyes.") The text and the music deftly remind us of a singular fact: that we look *at* inanimate objects, and we look *at* human limbs, but we look *into* someone's eyes, and every such look is compromising, fraught with significance, a face-to-face encounter with the other, and therefore a summons to hate or to love.[5] The motive of the look, played *"sehr ausdrucksvoll und zart"* on solo viola, here completes Isolde's words above a C-major chord on divided cellos. Wagner tightens the harmony on the second of the repeated notes, the bass moving from C to C-sharp, so making a diminished triad that then becomes the first inversion of a dominant seventh (ex. 3.2). In this simple but poignant way, Wagner captures what is meant by a "look into" another's eyes. The repeated G recalls the way in which a look first glimpses and then seizes the soul at which it is aimed, reaching in as though to grasp the tentative frail will and drag it to the surface, before releasing it with a sigh. At its first appearance in the Prelude, the Look motive is harmonized as it is in the passage that later explains it—with the semitone shift in the bass effecting a stepwise progression of the subliminal tonic (in the case of the Prelude, from F to G, here from C to D). It is the melodic wave on the surface that reveals a huge chromatic shift in the depths, and it is developed in the Prelude in such a way that the oceanic force below the surface at last bears everything away. The look of love is the visible revelation of the soul's darkest depths: this the audience learns as a musico-phenomenological fact long before the drama explains it. And the explanation by then is almost, though not quite, superfluous.

The detail of the raised sword and the look that lowers it was adapted by Wagner from Gottfried's muddled account of the smile, and it illustrates Wagner's genius as a dramatist. The look of love is the source of



Example 3.2

love's enchantment, and it has a metaphysical resonance beyond the reach of words. To dramatize the story of Tristan and Isolde, to make it in the highest degree plausible that these lovers should be inseparably attached to each other without understanding why, Wagner realized that he must dramatize the look that first connected them, since it joined them simultaneously in the spirit and in the flesh. To do this directly would have been impossible: from the spectator's viewpoint there is nothing to be seen of a look save eyes. The spectator cannot know what *meets* each pair of eyes, or what the eyes look *into*. This mysterious perception of the other as I, in the eye from which he looks at me, is available only to me, the subject. Only in recollection or narrative can this perception be conveyed, as when Donne writes "Our eye-beams twisted, and did thread / Our eyes, upon one double string."[6] On the other hand, the *refusal* to look, the turning away in shame, hesitation, or fear, is absolutely transparent to the spectator. Eyes that refuse to meet can convey their meaning to a third party; eyes that meet cannot. We have already encountered this deliberate looking away in scene 2, with Isolde's contemptuous reference to Tristan's reluctance to meet her, glance to glance.

It is interesting to compare Wagner's treatment of this episode with a work that it seems partly to recall—Schiller's *Jungfrau von Orleans*. In the penultimate scene of act 3 of Schiller's play, Joan of Arc raises her sword to slay Lionel, the English general whom she has just disarmed. Meeting his eyes, she lets fall her sword, as hatred turns to love. Only by melodramatic gestures and exclamatory dialogue is Schiller able to convey what happens in this moment: the look itself is no more than an interval in the action, its significance opaque to the audience. It is not until the great monologue that opens the next act that we really *feel* what has happened. Only then does its plausibility comes home to us. "Should I have killed him?" Joan asks herself, and the answer comes at once: "*Konnt ichs, da ich ihm / Ins Auge sah?*"—"Could I have done it, once I looked into his eye?"

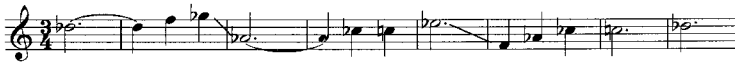
As Isolde recalls Tristan's look, the orchestra accompanies her words with the motive that explains them, inserting into the now tremulous narrative this softest of sorrowful sighs, and Isolde's anger is blown away. In that moment you the audience become Isolde, see with your ears, so to speak, the indescribable selfhood that lies coiled within the look of love.

This subjective vision convinces you as you could never be convinced by an objective presentation of the look itself. You realize that Isolde and Tristan have been *singled out,* and that this "singling" is their destiny.

Isolde goes on to tell how she tended the sick man again, that he might go home healed and rid her of the anguish of that look; and so the conquering Tristan returned to Cornwall, after swearing a thousand oaths of gratitude and fidelity. "Hear now how a knight keeps his oath!" she bitterly continues, her anger again rising up and dominating the narrative. Returning in a stately ship to Ireland, Tristan came in search of Isolde, this time to take her as bride to his uncle, the old and weary king of Cornwall. Had Morold lived, who would have dared put that insult on Ireland and on her? "Instead of wielding the sword of revenge, I weakly let it fall; now I am slave to my own vassal!"

After an astonished cry from Brangäne, Isolde continues her tale. They had all of them been weak and blind, she says; Tristan had acted as a traitor while she, knowing his identity, had nevertheless kept it hidden from her kindred while nurturing her trouble in silence. So Tristan had returned to Cornwall, sung her praises in the court of King Marke, and offered to bring her back as a prize for the king. Here Isolde broaches a theme to which she several times returns during the first act, and which is there too in Gottfried—that of the utter distinction between love and the market, between the bond that is sealed in the look of love and the transaction negotiated by the appraising eye of the pimp and the pander. The look of love encounters what is unique and irreplaceable; the eye of the pander measures its object as merchandise—as something that can be substituted, replaced, transferred from person to person like a whore. To put it another way, which Wagner himself subtly suggests: the pander looks *at* what the lover looks *into*.

Isolde works herself into a wild passion, calling for vengeance for Morold and for the death of Tristan. Brangäne rushes to her and, leading her gently to the couch, searches for words of consolation. Tristan is no traitor, she explains, but the loyal servant of his king, and one who has acted moreover for the good of Ireland and its princess, bringing peace to the one and a splendid throne to the other. Isolde, staring fixedly before her, and to gloomy music that takes off from the Look motive and which



Example 3.3

clearly reveals that she has barely heard Brangäne's words, makes the following as yet mysterious pronouncement:

> *Ungeminnt*
> *den hehrsten Mann*
> *stets mir nah zu sehen!*
> *Wie könnt' ich die Qual bestehen?*

("I, unloved, to see before me the noblest man! How could I endure that torment?"). Brangäne, assuming the reference to be to King Marke, asks, to the caressing melody in example 3.3, where in the world does there live a man who could see Isolde and not love and gladly die for her? And if the king should be deflected from her by some magic spell, Brangäne has been entrusted with the antidote that will cure him. Lowering her voice, she reminds Isolde, to the accompaniment of motive 2, of her mother's art: "Do you not think that she who knows and weighs all things would have sent me with you into a strange land without counsel for you in your hour of need?"

Isolde ignores the overt meaning of these words, and, darkly hinting at another purpose, commands Brangäne to produce the casket of philters. Brangäne lifts from it "the noblest draught of all" as the orchestra weaves her words into the love music of the Prelude. Isolde interrupts her: "You are wrong," she cries, while bassoons, trombones, and tuba trouble the depths with motive 9 (described variously as Fate, the Death Potion, or Poison); "I know a better draught, and I carved a sign on its neck: this is the drink that serves my need!" She snatches the philter of death, and Brangäne recoils in horror. At that moment the sailors are heard, loudly preparing to land, and their rhythmical cry fills the stage with excitement. For a moment Isolde stands transfixed with terror at the dreaded conclusion to her voyage. And then Kurwenal, roughly bursting through the curtain, orders the two women to prepare to go ashore.

The dialogue between Brangäne and Isolde has advanced the drama to crisis point. It has also subtly introduced the themes of loyalty and chivalry, showing that these virtues form the context of Isolde's emotion and are also destined to be swept aside by it. This gives wonderful credibility to her speech to Kurwenal, with which the fourth scene begins, and in which she herself invokes chivalric custom and the imperatives of the royal court. Tell your master, she says, that I will not stand beside him to be conducted to King Marke until he has obeyed the demands of ancient custom and done atonement for a wrong. She responds to Kurwenal's insolent gesture by repeating her demand: Tristan must atone for a wrong that she has yet to forgive; otherwise she cannot allow herself to be conducted to the king. Partially subdued but still insolent, Kurwenal agrees to take the message.

Isolde turns quickly to her companion, embracing her with distraught farewells. Motive 9 comes to the fore as Brangäne, still misunderstanding her mistress's purpose, besieges her with questions. Only when Isolde takes the philter of death from the casket, and 9 blends with 2, the motive of Magic, Longing, and Desire, does Brangäne finally grasp what is at stake. Isolde subdues her protests with the same imperious tones with which she had overcome the resistance of Kurwenal, repeating Brangäne's reference to the queen of Ireland's magic arts, and giving new meaning to the idea of an antidote for all poisons and for the deepest of woes. The anguished Brangäne is then brushed aside as Kurwenal enters to announce Sir Tristan. The motive of Isolde's Anger flares up briefly, and then Isolde, composing herself with an enormous effort, responds with dignified words: "Let Sir Tristan approach."

The fifth scene is introduced by an orchestral passage based on motive 17—sometimes referred to as the motive of *Sitte* or Custom, sometimes as the motive of Tristan's Honor on account of its association with Tristan's words as he takes the fateful cup from Isolde, and sometimes as the Morold motive, because it occurs when Isolde refers to Morold. One commentator even calls it the motive of Destiny.[7] None of these names does more than attach a convenient label to a theme whose atmosphere eludes all attempts to describe it. With its octave fanfare on horns and woodwinds, followed by a long A-flat that holds the music in its immov-

able grip while heavy inverted triads repeatedly thud into it, the theme conveys the unbearable inner tension that has now beset the characters. It shows the fierce grip of the past, of the bonds of honor and allegiance, of all that has been done and rightly done by Tristan to bring about a situation that will soon be his doom. During the course of this orchestral interlude Tristan enters and stands respectfully at the boundary of Isolde's apartment. He then approaches and her agitation increases, with the upsurge of the Death/Fate/Poison motive giving unambiguous expression to her state of mind.

She reproaches him for avoiding her, and he pleads knightly custom as his excuse. She reminds him of a custom equally binding, which is the need to make atonement to foes if they are to become friends. There follows a complex exchange in which Isolde does most of the talking, rehearsing the salient facts: Tristan's slaying of Morold, her ministering to the wounded Tantris and discovering his identity, her silence then and also later, when Tristan returned to Ireland and the oath of peace between their nations was sworn. "If Morold was so dear to you," says Tristan gloomily, "take my sword and wield it better than at that other time."

Isolde responds that King Marke would have small cause to thank her for such an act. Her ironical speech ends thus:

> *Wahre dein Schwert!*
> *Da einst ich's schwang*
> *als mir die Rache*
> *im Busen rang,*
> *als dein messender Blick*
> *mein Bild sich stahl,*
> *ob ich Herrn Marke*
> *taug' als Gemahl.*
> *Das Schwert—da liess ich's sinken*
> *Nun lass uns Sühne trinken!*

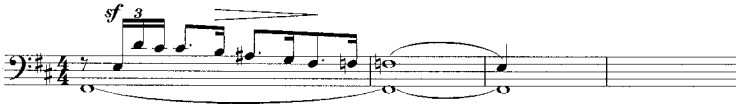
("Put up your sword, which once I held while vengeance swelled in my breast, when with measuring gaze you eyed my form, wondering whether I would please Lord Marke as a bride. I let the sword fall then; so now let us drink atonement.") The reference to "measuring gaze" (*messender Blick*)

is accompanied by the Look motive, painfully harmonized with a minor ninth, again vividly contrasting the real look of love with the expert eye of the pander, as seen and understood by its humiliated victim.

As Isolde beckons to the terrified Brangäne to prepare the drink, the sailors once again burst out aloft, furling the sails for landing. "Where are we?" asks Tristan, repeating the question with which, on Isolde's lips, the act began. The double meaning of Isolde's reply—*"Hart am Ziel!"* ("Near our goal")—is not lost on the audience, since the orchestra sounds motive 13, the motive of Death, beneath it. Nor is it lost on Tristan, who mutters to himself gloomily, "the queen of silence silences me: for I know what her silence hides but what I am hiding she cannot tell." (The beautiful knot of words here depends upon the German *schweigen,* an active verb meaning to be silent and also to hide by silence: Tristan has understood the meaning of Isolde's silence—not this one only, but the many silences to which she has already referred, and which began when she kept silent about the identity of Tantris.)

The bustle and excitement of the sailors continues to burst in upon the lovers as Isolde reproachfully offers the *Sühnetrank*—the drink of atonement—to Tristan: "In a moment we shall be standing before King Marke; it would be well if you could tell him 'My Lord and King, look what a gentle wife I have brought for you; I slew her betrothed and sent his head home to her; my wound she gently healed. My life was in her power, but the gentle maiden gave it to me. Her country's dishonor and shame—these too she gave, that she might be your bride. And these thanks for worthy gifts I earned by a sweet draught of atonement, graciously offered to me by her in expiation of all my guilt.' "

Isolde's ironical submissiveness is reflected in the orchestra, which wraps her words in the vinous fumes of example 3.4, like bittersweet vapor from the drink she holds. But as she holds out the cup to Tristan the Death/Fate/Poison motive sounds through the bass, and her meaning—not lost on Tristan in any case—comes to the fore. The sailors cry from above "Stand by the cable! Drop the anchor!" and Tristan, briefly remembering his role as captain, shouts to them to put round to the tide. But then, recalled to the business of atonement, he seizes the cup, praises the queen of Ireland's healing arts, invokes his honor, and, to the accom-



Example 3.4

paniment of the Death-devoted Head motive (13), drinks "the kindly drink of oblivion"—*"Vergessens güt'ger Trank."* Tristan chooses his words carefully, to show Isolde that he recognizes that the *Vergessen* which is the reward of atonement is also the *Vergessen* of death. Isolde snatches the cup from him, crying "Betrayed here too? Mine the half!" and then, looking at him, "Traitor, I drink to you!" The Look motive sounds in the orchestra as the two, staring defiantly at death, realize that it is love, not death, which awaits them, that love and death are in any case inseparable, and that they too are now inseparable in life, in love, and eternally.

In Wagner's version, the love potion acquires a pathos that is missing from the medieval story. Recognizing that, for her mistress, love and death exhaust the future possibilities, Brangäne has substituted the drink of love so that Isolde will live. As Thomas Mann (among others) points out,[8] the substitution of the love philter is not strictly necessary: a glass of water would have been sufficient. Believing that they face their last moments on earth, and face them together, the lovers inevitably give way to their passion. The substitution of the drinks serves, however, to underline the fact that the death and love distinguished by Brangäne are not two outcomes but one. Moreover, it gives dramatic focus to King Marke's later act of forgiveness on discovering what he thinks to be the true cause of Isolde's adulterous passion.

The love potion also has another and more subtle significance. Like everything imbibed, the drink operates through the body: it works in the physical depths, and the love that flowers from it is rooted in animal life. This is obviously true of erotic love; but the potion enables Wagner to give dramatic reality to a profound religious idea, namely that the thing which enslaves us—the mortal body and its inexorable laws—also frees us, since it is the occasion for redeeming sacrifice. Incarnation is the

body's triumph over the will, but also the occasion of its defeat. By accepting death through an act of sacrifice, we transcend death and raise ourselves above the mortal condition that imposed this fate upon us. This thought underlies the mystery of Christ's Passion; and also that of the passion (another kind of passion, but in a sense also the same kind) of Tristan and Isolde. Hence the description of the drink—a *Sühnetrank,* a drink of atonement, the same drink that is offered in the Eucharist and which there symbolizes the death that atoned for the sins of the world. The love-Eucharist of Gottfried achieves, in Wagner, its final mystical form.

The ship bearing King Marke is approaching, and the sailors welcome it with jubilant cries. Brangäne wrings her hands in despair, foreseeing now that her well-meant deception will lead to even greater woe than the death she had wished to prevent. But Tristan and Isolde notice none of this. Lost in each other, they throw away honor, shame, duty, and the claims of the world like garments, baring themselves for the eternal embrace that is now their only goal and consolation.

Brangäne forces herself between them and throws a royal mantle around the tranced form of Isolde. "Hail King Marke!" sounds again from above, with fanfares on trombones and trumpets. Kurwenal, in high spirits, enters to announce that the king is approaching in a boat, rejoicing at the arrival of his bride. "What king?" asks Tristan, while Isolde turns in bewilderment to Brangäne to ask "Where am I? What drink did you give?" Learning the truth, she falls on Tristan's breast with a despairing cry, "Must I then live?" to which Tristan responds, "Oh bliss full of treachery! Happiness bought through guile!" foreseeing thus the inevitable course of their love. By now people are swarming into the ship, C-major fanfares blot out the motive of Magic and Desire, and the curtain falls upon a radiance of collective joy, at the center of which stand, barely conscious, the two alien, suffering, isolated creatures who are about to bring ruin on their king.

So ends the first act—a triumph of dramatic organization, whose power reflects the truth and precision with which Wagner has drawn the character of Isolde and, against the odds, awoken our sympathy toward her. By using Brangäne's love as a frame, by exploiting double meanings

in both words and music, and most of all by the sheer commanding eloquence of the orchestral mirror into which Isolde sings, Wagner shines a beam through her self-centered raving to the core of tenderness and suffering she is vainly trying to protect. In this confused virgin, therefore, we encounter woman's love at its most sublime—uncomprehended, unwanted, and predestined like death.

Of Tristan we have learned rather less—a fact that in no way subtracts from the drama. Isolde's retrospective portrait of Tristan indicates a strong, decisive, loyal, and heroic character, capable of arousing in a virgin's heart the same mute admiration that Odysseus aroused in Nausicaa. Tristan is a risk taker, although one who has taken one risk too many. He is also correct and courteous, a man of the world who inspires trust and devotion in his subordinates. But all this is only surface. There is a secret core to Tristan, and it is precisely in this core that passion has been awakened. The effect of Tristan's reticence in Isolde's presence, of the knotted and enigmatic words through which he shows how completely he understands her and how reluctant he is nevertheless to say so, is to suggest hidden depths of character well beyond the reach of chivalric morality. We know that Tristan, more than any other character in the opera, has a public and a private side, and that what he *really* is—what he is for himself—is hidden behind the veil of courtly virtue. Tristan the hero is successful, glorious, universally admired. But the real Tristan is lonely, suffering, and vulnerable. And it is that real Tristan, whose nature we have as yet barely guessed at, who was touched and healed by the Princess Isolde, and who acknowledged this fact with a look. Between powerful, decisive, heroic men and lively, beautiful young heiresses sexual attraction is normal. But, Wagner's drama conveys, that is precisely *not* what is going on between Tristan and Isolde. Here we are not in the vicinity of an ordinary, repeatable, marketplace transaction of the kind that disgusted Gottfried. We are encountering the erotic in its highest form, as a bond that is completely independent of the external, public, and objective side of human life, and which binds soul to suffering soul in eternal union.

The nature of this erotic bond, its inner certainty, and its indifference to the world of others form the subject matter of Wagner's second act. The music begins with a striking motive, usually known as the motive of

Day (no. 18), which Wagner appended to his original sketch for the orchestral introduction. Throughout this and the ensuing act, day is a symbol of the public world—the world of others, in which all is open to the gaze, illumined and also compromised. The night, by contrast, is a symbol of intimacy and secrecy. In Wagner's night there *is* no other, since self and other are one. The dissolution of the self that occurs in love presages the final dissolution in death—the release from the world of daylight into eternal night, which thereby becomes both the symbol and the goal of love.

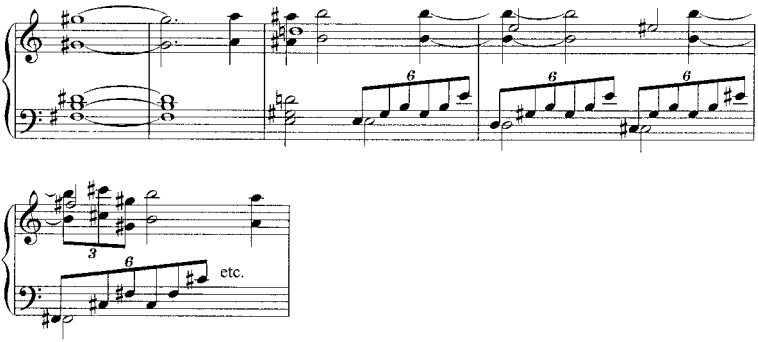
Expressed in such a stark and prosaic form, those ideas may sound fantastic. But the artistic purpose of Wagner's drama is to show that they are not fantastic at all, but rather the exaltation and vindication of a tendency that is already there in all of us, buried like a seed in the most mundane human love, unable to bud in the trampled world of daily life but flowering at last in art, which rescues from the marketplace of compromise this "most beautiful of my dreams," as Wagner described it.[9] The day/night symbolism, simple in itself, is enriched with allusions to Novalis, the Upanishads, and Schopenhauer,[10] and elaborated as a powerful, complex dramatic idea. It is the lovers themselves who introduce it, trying to make sense through symbols of the strange thing that has happened to them. The symbols are unfolded in a state of palpitating discovery, and Isolde uses them to revisit her earlier encounters with Tristan, to examine what took place in those days when she could not or would not avow her true emotion, and to gaze in wonder on the meaning of her life.

The motive of Day gives way to that of Impatience (20), which is developed beneath motive 21, sometimes referred to as Love's Longing. This leads to yet another new motive, derived as a prolongation of 2 (Magic or Desire), and associated with Ecstasy or Passion (22). All this material is developed with contrapuntal mastery, wiping away the empty splendor with which the first act had ended, and creating in its place an atmosphere of intimacy and anxious expectation. The curtain rises to reveal a garden with high trees, and steps leading to Isolde's chamber in the castle in the background. It is a clear, balmy summer night, and by the open door of the castle a torch is burning. Backstage we hear the sound of hunting

horns, slowly receding through the forest (no. 23). The fanfare at the end of act 1 had blared out a C-major triad; these horns are like a faint, sad echo of that fanfare, softly reiterating the triad of C minor. At the same time an F sounds below them in the orchestra. The effect of this is wonderfully suggestive of the psychic distance between the listening Isolde and the far-off sounds of the royal hunting party. If you attend to the backstage music you hear a constant melancholy call in C minor; add the foregrounded F in the bass, however, and the C-minor triad turns into the dominant ninth of B-flat, the actual key of this opening section. The horns on the stage create an effect of tonal ambiguity, expounding plain diatonic harmonies that are, as it were, snatched by the orchestra and pressed into muted discords and alien keys.

Brangäne is onstage, looking anxiously into the chamber. Isolde soon emerges, fretfully asking whether she can extinguish the torch, thereby giving Tristan the signal to approach. Brangäne repeatedly refers to the hunting horns, which tell of danger; Isolde replies that she hears no horns but only the rustling of leaves and the gentle laughter of the wind—a retort that the orchestra makes especially plausible, by again seizing that soft C-minor triad from the stage and transforming it, this time into a ninth chord on A-flat that is finally resolved into D-flat major as the motive of Love's Longing returns. This much admired passage has the effect of transporting the listener into Isolde's point of view, so as to hear the world transformed by erotic longing, with all recalcitrant details erased and only the ineffable sweetness of the moment and its joys remaining.[11]

Brangäne urgently warns Isolde against Melot, whose crafty eyes were fixed on Tristan when he handed Isolde to King Marke. Isolde brushes the warning away, referring to the trust and friendship between Tristan and Melot, who has obliged Tristan by distracting the king and the court with this midnight hunt. "Put out the light!" she cries, "Give Night the signal that she may descend and enfold us." Brangäne curses the moment when, out of mistaken fidelity, she had substituted the drink of love for that of death. All this misery has been her work, she believes, and she will bear the guilt of it forever. "Not your work," Isolde replies, "but Frau Minne's," referring to the divine personification of love whose medieval name Gott-



Example 3.5

fried too had used. The orchestra depicts the character of Frau Minne in a graceful elaboration of motive 2 (ex. 3.5) that is at once woven into a symphonic fantasia. The effect of this is to lift Isolde yet higher above the world of caution, sobriety, and common sense. "Hers was I, hers alone," Isolde declares. "Now let me show obedience to her."

This reference to Frau Minne is the only explicit invocation of a deity in *Tristan und Isolde*. Although at the end of the opera King Marke blesses the dead, there is no indication in Wagner's text that this gesture is to be understood in its Christian meaning, still less that it should be conducted with the sign of the cross. Gottfried's and Thomas's poems assume a Christian background. But they recognize that God's commands are no more influential over the feelings of the lovers than the commands of King Mark. Given the tangential nature of the religious references in the medieval sources, it is plausible to argue that they have been grafted onto a pagan original; and it is equally plausible to suppose that this pagan original is being brought back to life by Wagner.

Two points must be made in reply, however. The first is that Wagner responded instinctively to a feature of medieval literature that was later perceptively analyzed by C. S. Lewis—namely, its use of allegory. In a certain respect, Lewis argued, allegory is the opposite of symbolism.[12] While symbolism uses human figures and situations to represent divine mysteries, allegory uses supernatural beings and happenings to represent human realities. Symbolism is read upward toward the transcendental; allegory

is read downward toward the empirical world. The reference to Frau Minne "medievalizes" Isolde, so to speak. She belongs to a society in which earthly passions are allegorized as intrusions from a higher sphere. As Wagner would have been aware, "Minne" was, in the works of Wolfram von Eschenbach, Walter von der Vogelweide, and their contemporaries, the normal word for love, one that went out of currency in the sixteenth century and remained so.[13] Frau Minne is therefore as direct an allegorical figure as Ovid's Amor.

Wagner is also making a deeper point, here and in the story of the *Sühnetrank*. The meaning of these "supernatural" things is to be found in the natural world of human sexual feeling. But our sexuality is already shaped by religious conceptions. In desire we encounter sanctity, desecration, consecration, and atonement; and by exalting desire into love we seek redemption. These religious ideas indicate no particular faith; they are retrieved *from the human experience itself,* by a drama that has the truth of our condition as its foremost controlling aim. This drama is neither pagan nor Christian, but a tale of beings who live as humans naturally live, poised between the empirical and the transcendental and understanding each in terms of the other.

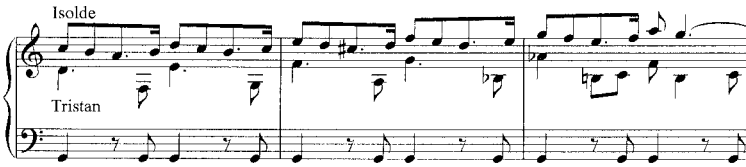
Hence, by invoking Frau Minne, Isolde is pointing out that her love is sacred: an immovable decree before which self-interest and rational calculation fall silent. Brangäne makes a last appeal to reason, but, with a sudden broadening of the melodic line, Isolde cries "Let Night descend, that she may shed her light!" She commands Brangäne to mount the battlements and keep watch, and then seizes the torch and dashes it to the ground. In the orchestral passage that follows, the motives of Impatience and Longing are imbued with a new urgency by motive 22c, used with Beethovenian abandon to create the climax needed for Tristan's entry.

Scene 2 begins with the lovers flinging themselves into each others' arms, uttering grammarless declarations that express their wonder at the sudden gift of happiness. The listener might ask whether this meeting of the lovers is their first since the avowal of love, or whether it is merely the latest snatched encounter of the kind relished by Gottfried. When dismissing Brangäne's suspicion of Melot, Isolde had said, "Whenever my Tristan must leave me, then is he with Melot alone," implying that her

meetings with Tristan have been frequent. On the other hand, there is nothing to suggest that those earlier meetings have given the lovers the opportunity that night now affords them—namely, the opportunity not merely to consummate their love but also to open their hearts to each other. Wagner himself, writing to Mathilde Wesendonck while composing the music for this act, referred to it as "my pair of lovers' first remeeting."[14] The scene that follows, in which they tremblingly explore each other through words, looks, and caresses, suggests that this is indeed their first full surrender to their passion, which is not so much consummated as sublimated by the rush of resistless intimacy. They touch each other's eyes and lips and hands, they utter each other's names, they embrace and lie together, but already their love is seeking fulfillment in a supreme act of renunciation, in which all these worldly attachments will be discarded.

Wagner's intention is not to deny that this love is erotic, or to present his lovers as discarnate beings engaged in some strenuous Platonic exercise. On the contrary, the full force of sexual desire runs through words and music; but it is a desire so focused on the individual object that body and soul are fused in it. What the lovers feel is, in the true meaning of the word, a chaste desire, a desire without concupiscence, a desire that makes no room for the human universal but which is absorbed without remainder by the object of love. Only such a desire could find expression in the ecstatic language and rhythms of the dialogue that follows. The metaphysical force of this desire is apparent not only in the music, but also in the peculiar way in which the lovers halo each other with their words and gestures. Desire soars beyond the goal of carnal union into a spiritual realm already dominated by the thought of renunciation.

The duet that begins the second scene is composed of short, ecstatic lines in which the lovers fling themselves at each other, verbally, physically, and musically—in one remarkable passage (ex. 3.6) singing five parallel sevenths over the frenzied motive 22c before retreating into breathless dialogue. Soon their thoughts begin to crystallize, Isolde succinctly introducing the night/day symbolism: "In darkness you, in light was I," and Tristan promptly seizing on this idea, railing against the cruel light that kept them apart, identifying the light not with the torch only but



Example 3.6

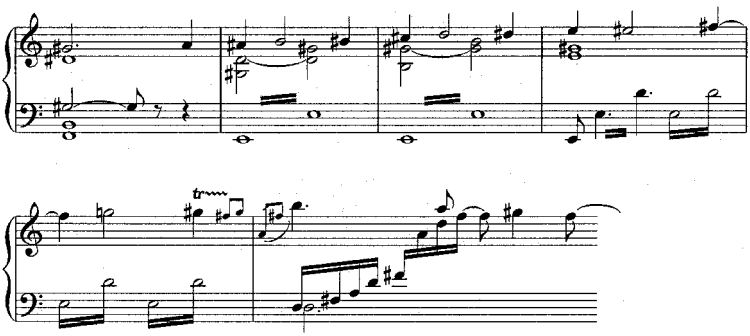
with day itself. Isolde extends the image, so that day becomes the "deceitful flame" in which the world exists with its business, pomp, and politics, and in which Tristan had once appeared as a traitor, coming to Ireland to fetch her for King Marke.

In this way Isolde is able to use the image of day to broach a topic of utmost concern to her. Surely Tristan already loved her when he returned to take her as another's bride? How then could he have done what he did and still deserve her love? There is considerable subtlety in the use of the imagery here. The day/night symbolism enables Isolde not merely to formulate her anxiety, but also to face up to it, to anticipate the soothing answer to it, and to embrace the long-term goal that will resolve it. This too Tristan perceives, and he supplies the answer that Isolde needs. He describes the day as *"der Welten-Ehren Tagessonne"*—the blazing sun of worldly honor, to which he was bound by his life and circumstances, by fealty and gratitude, and which had stolen into his soul. In that soul, however, was also the region of "chaste Night," where Isolde had first appeared to him in a vision on which he scarcely dared to gaze. Only when she reappeared, resplendent in the glorious light of day, would he dare to look on her. For then he would not confront her under the aspect of love or as the inner object of his most private passion, but rather as a bright presence in the public world. And when required to vindicate his honor by the envious courtiers, who accused him of wishing to usurp the throne, he vowed to prove his innocence by bringing Isolde as a bride to Marke and so renouncing his claims as presumptive heir. This is what honor, the law of day, required of him, and so he deceived his own heart. Yet in the chaste night of his longing he remained true to her.

Isolde denounces the day and the delusion that had enslaved him to it.

But she takes up the imagery at the point where Tristan has left off, implicitly accepting that it was not Tristan but the world of public duty that had caused her grief. She, like Tristan, had longed for the night in which all the lies and delusions of honor would be extinguished and they would be joined eternally. And she pushes the image to its inevitable conclusion, identifying night and death. Now at last they freely confess to what both had intended with the "drink of atonement," and which had been withheld from them by another deceit. Tristan praises the drink of love for the understanding it gave him, of the "wondrous realm of Night"—the understanding that love and death are inextricable.

The music develops unhampered by stage directions, unhampered even by words—so abstract and allusive has the dialogue become—to form a bright symphonic halo in which the lovers figure as victims of their love and victorious through it. Their mutual explanation ends at last as Tristan, to motive 27, which perfectly captures his reckless frame of mind, sings of "the yearning hence toward holy Night, where unending and only true, the delight of love laughs to him." The last words are set to a chromatic scale that, beginning on a G-sharp (which tops the half-diminished seventh "Tristan chord" from the Prelude that set the whole drama in motion), ascends an octave to the G-sharp above, while the harmony modulates to the dominant of A minor (ex. 3.7). This progression summarizes the opening bars of the Prelude, telling us that the lovers are exactly where they were when the action began, but now understand



Example 3.7

their fate and freely accept it. The interrupted cadence onto the chord of F major, with the dissonant suspension on B, which had set the Prelude in motion, is here replaced by a sweeter cadence onto the chord of D major, the suspension sounding now relaxed and blissful as the melodic line sinks down quietly to a fleeting resolution in A major. The lovers have reached the highest point of human freedom, which is the consciousness of destiny and the acceptance of its decrees.

This first part of scene 2, with its lack of action and its allusive, Novalis-derived poetry,[15] might at first strike the listener as undramatic. In fact it is a delicate representation of one of the most intimate moments of love—the moment of confession, in which the past is recuperated, those former doubts and hesitations rehearsed and atoned for, and a supreme confidence born from the recognition that love has reached what is most inward and true and committed in the beloved. Tristan's "chaste night" harbors a love destined for Isolde and discoverable to no one but her. Wagner's music takes us through the excitement, fear, and consolation of this mutual discovery in a way that matches the dramatic intensity of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* and which relies also on Shakespeare's contrast between the world of worldly honor and the world of psychological need, while intensifying the romantic inwardness, the inaccessible metaphysical isolation, to which these world-defying individualists are condemned.

Explanations over, and destiny recognized, a sublime contentment reigns—a foretaste of that final satisfaction in the realm of night to which everything now is tending. Tristan "draws Isolde down on to a flowery bank, sinks on his knee before her, and lays his head on her arm," summoning the "night of love," to motive 26. This theme culminates in a magical sequence of whole-tone caresses over ninth and thirteenth chords, which Wagner had also used in the song "Träume," setting a poem by his beloved Mathilde Wesendonck. This supremely intimate music, expressing the complete givenness of the lovers to each other, flowers into a duet, as Tristan and Isolde invoke the night whose meaning they have now defined and accepted.

To a new theme (motive no. 28, reminiscent of 4) the lovers sing words that recall those given to them by Gottfried, but which go a step

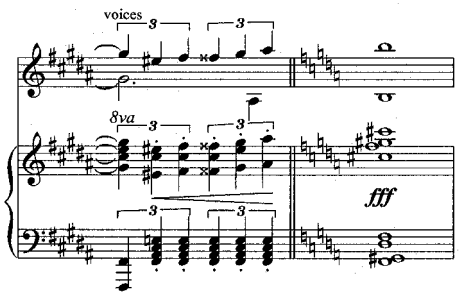
further than Gottfried, alluding to the metaphysical vision of the Upanishads: "Heart on heart and mouth on mouth, one the breath that binds as one; my glance fails, blind with wonder; the world with all its dazzle pales—world that the Day lit with its lies; from blinding illusion now set free, I am *myself* the world." In the night, at this point of supreme ecstasy, it is possible for Tristan to declare that "I am myself the world": for there is no competition, so to speak, no objective order, and the only other person for him—Isolde—is not another at all, but consubstantial with himself.[16] The same goes for Isolde, who sings identical words to identical music.

The passage culminates in a reharmonized version of motive 27, as the lovers sing, in unison, of *"Liebe-heiligstes Leben"*—"life made most holy through love"—a life that (the music here *pianissimo*) is also a never-awakening dreamless joy in death. Brangäne's voice is heard, singing words of warning over soft harmonies, beginning with the harmonic sequence from "Träume," which serve both to enfold the lovers and to remind us of the remoteness of their thoughts from the real approaching dangers. As Newman points out,[17] Wagner is here drawing on a medieval artistic convention—that of the warder's or watchman's song, supposedly sung by the person appointed to keep watch from a tower as illicit lovers enlace themselves in the lower darkness. This medieval convention originated with the Provençal *alba* (dawn song, *aubade* in French), itself probably derived from Hispano-Arabic archetypes.

The stock themes of the *alba* are the approach of dawn and the pathos of a love that the dawn forbids. Once again we encounter the depth of Wagner's engagement with the world of courtly love. Not only does he see an opportunity to revive an art form intimately expressive of the condition of medieval women. He also produces some of the most exquisite music in the entire work—music that gives dramatic sense to what is essentially a lyrical idea. No artist has revived the medieval experience so feelingly as Wagner does in this wholly admirable passage. And in Wagner's hands the *alba* takes on a new meaning. Brangäne's warning goes unheeded, since, although it warns against day, it also promises death. When, after a meditation on their union and the impotence of death to sever it, the lovers begin the strophic song that we know as the *Liebestod*

(the Love Death, a term originally applied by Wagner to the Prelude in its concert version), Brangäne's voice breaks across them, creating a texture that will later bring the entire drama to its serene conclusion. The melody of the *Liebestod*—motive no. 30—is a supreme example of Wagner's musical architectonic, and I discuss it in the next chapter. Its effect is of a constantly broadening, ever more accepting movement toward the culmination promised in the lovers' words. "So let us die and never part, never waking, never fearing, our very names forgotten, and with no life but in our love."[18]

The second strophe, in which the melodic line is prolonged to ecstatic length, aided by the insertion of a tender *gruppetto* (motive 31), rehearses again, in ever more intricate verbal knots, the mystical identity of the lovers and their consecration to night. It moves at last to a climax that has no conceivable culmination except the one Wagner provides: a prolonged cadence in B major, from which the final tonic chord is brutally displaced by the most excruciating dissonance in the whole work. This dissonance sounds against the double-octave B of the lovers, but in itself contains not a single note of the B-major triad (ex. 3.8). Brangäne screams from above as Kurwenal rushes in, sword drawn, calling on Tristan to save himself, followed at once by the hunting party led by Melot and King Marke. Isolde, "seized by involuntary shame," leans on the flowery bank with averted face while Tristan stretches out his mantle to hide her. To the accompaniment of the Day motive Tristan breaks the silence: "The dreary Day for the last time dawns."



Example 3.8

So ends the greatest love scene in all opera—indeed, the only attempt to dramatize the metaphysical puzzle contained in love, by using the power of music to give objective form to the inner selfhood of passion. By diverting the flow of the drama through this ecstatic land of erotic knowledge, Wagner has again postponed the question of Tristan's nature and identity. We have learned that he is a match for Isolde in passion, devotion, and metaphysical calisthenics. We know that he treasured and nurtured his public, honor-bound and heroic side, the side that shone in the light of day. We understand that it is another side of Tristan that Isolde has awoken, and which has now asserted its supremacy. But still we don't know Tristan as we know Isolde. And we *need* to know him, if the call of death is to be finally understood and the two lovers consecrated to each other, not in their feelings only but in our feelings too.

The process therefore begins in which Tristan's inner identity is unfolded. From this point on Tristan is the center of the drama, and Wagner makes this clear with a brilliant dramatic stroke. He brings forward the hitherto unknown King Marke, who directs his thoughts and words throughout the scene that follows not to Isolde but to Tristan, the real object, we discover to our astonishment, of the king's most intimate emotion. In music of sublime and forgiving sadness, Wagner sets out to display the sorrow of a dutiful man burdened by kingship. We are now shown the world of day that Tristan has just spurned and calumniated, in the person whose duty it is to maintain it. Day, too, has its *Innigkeit,* its suffering and subjective side; and this stolen love is the wound that hurts it into consciousness.

King Marke belongs to a Wagnerian archetype: that of the authority figure, guardian of the social order, who recognizes the youthful transgressor and comes to understand that the transgressor is also a redeemer. The relation between Marke and Tristan parallels the relations between Sachs and Walter, Gurnemanz and Parsifal, even Wotan and Siegfried. Wagner's authority figures are not tyrants but, on the contrary, feeling, suffering, completely human figures, for whom the burden of authority involves both sacrifice and solitude. To many of his contemporaries Wagner appeared to be the champion of youth against age and transgression against conformity. But a more considered reading of Wagner's greatest

works suggests the opposite picture. Like Shakespeare, Wagner understood that communities need authority, and that those charged with upholding it are not oppressors but heroes of another kind, condemned to a life of lonely sacrifice. Wagner's authority figures are imbued with a pathos equal to that of the outsiders with whom they are secretly in league. They guard us against the crowd emotions that Hans Sachs so movingly deprecates at the beginning of act 3 of *Die Meistersinger.* And their dramatic role is to hold the world in place while at the same time recognizing and making room for the one who renews it.

The psychoanalytical meaning of this dramatic theme is evident. In his mature works Wagner is seeking paternal forgiveness for the transgression of erotic love, and in *Tristan* the situation is all the closer to Freud's Oedipal archetype, in that the object of love is the father figure's wife.[19] But—interesting though such Freudian speculations are—they do not take us to the dramatic heart of Wagner's masterpiece or to the quite peculiar idea of redemption that is, from this moment onward, being urged on us by *Tristan und Isolde*. They describe the raw material, the emotional generality, from which Wagner fashions the wholly individual destiny of Tristan. As the drama now will show, that destiny is the destiny of an orphan who has never known paternal love.

The scene opens with Melot pointing in triumph to Tristan: "Was I not right? There he is, caught in the act. Have I not guarded my king from shame?" The mournful motive 32 sounds on bass clarinet, anticipating the king's reply: "Do you really think so?" And instead of turning to Isolde and discarding her—as Melot's words suggest—he points to Tristan, praises him as the truest of men, and mourns the loss of his honor from such a friend. "Daylight phantoms! Morning visions! Lying and vain, begone!" Tristan cries, but the king renews his reproaches, to motive 33, also on bass clarinet, showing how this betrayal makes empty and vain all the loyal service that Tristan has rendered. Marke tenderly invokes their mutual love, the bequest of his kingdom to his nephew, and Tristan's sacrifice in conferring on Cornwall the loveliest of queens. Marke praises Isolde's awe-inspiring beauty and confesses that he himself, though desiring her, has never dared to possess her.

Through Marke's noble, grieving music we perceive that Isolde too

had a part of her in daylight, that Tristan's sacrifice in the realm of day imposed an equal burden on his king, and that all this artifice of honor had to be paid for with the deep dishonor of a king humbled and betrayed by his truest and best-loved subject—a subject who is also his heir. "Why this shame to me?" Marke asks in helpless sorrow. "Who will ever reveal the deep mysterious source of all my woe?" Tristan, raising his eyes in sympathy, replies: "Oh King, that can I never tell you; even the meaning of your question is beyond your grasp," motives 1 and 2 meanwhile reminding us that Tristan and Isolde themselves were unable to name the force that has governed them, until compelled by the drink to avow it.

Tristan turns to Isolde, as the orchestra muses on their recent oneness (motives 29, 27). He poses a question that only she can understand: "Where I am going now will you, Isolde, follow?" And to a new and solemn melody (motive 35), Tristan describes the place: "where the sun never shines, the dark land from which I took my being and in which my mother bore me: the wondrous realm of Night." The melody gives a new meaning to the realm of night: it is a funereal place, a place to which Tristan's love has ever tended since his mother was entombed there upon giving him birth. We look far into the dark reaches of Tristan's soul, and now at last he is fully real to us—the orphan and outsider who has wandered the world in search of a love that only Isolde could provide, loving him, as she does, with the total and predestined commitment that a mother too must feel. Isolde reminds him that she had once followed him unwillingly into a strange land when he tore her from her home, but that now she goes willingly to a land that is Tristan's. Tristan bends over her and kisses her gently on the forehead as the orchestra briefly recalls their moment of mutual happiness.

Melot steps forward and challenges Tristan. "It was this man," says Tristan scornfully, "who urged me to win more fame and honor by bringing you, Isolde, to the King as a bride. But your glance blinded him, too." He hurls himself on Melot, but then drops his sword as Melot strikes. Tristan sinks wounded into the arms of Kurwenal. The orchestra builds a strangely painful cadence from the beginning of motive 33—here orchestrated to reveal its other side as an inversion of 17, the motive of Honor and Custom—and, as the king restrains Melot, the curtain falls to a piercing D-minor chord.

The inner complexity of Tristan has now been revealed, at the very moment when death seemed about to overtake him. We know that his pursuit of fame and honor has been genuine, but also that it has compensated for a great inner lack. He has wandered through the courts of kings as a love-hungry orphan, and all his delicacy and heroism, which are the effect of this, are destined to be undermined by it when he at last encounters love. Long before Freud, Wagner perceived that to fall in love is at the same time to rediscover a buried love, and that love comes to us as a destiny in this new form because it was a destiny too in the old. And when that earlier love has been deprived of its object, so that it can never be satisfied by the bright world of action and opportunity but must always be retreating into solitude and darkness, then is born the soul of the outsider, the one who is never truly at one with the place he occupies, however exalted, and however much energy and conviction has gone into winning it. Such, we now know, is Tristan, whose personality has been unburied and brought to life—and therefore to death—by Isolde's interrogatory passion.

The bleak prelude to the last act begins with motive 36—a transformation of 2, in a desolate instrumentation for six-part strings—which quickly exhausts itself, leaving the violins to waft upward in a strange cold sequence of thirds (motive 37), like some lonely bird above a lifeless ocean. Motive 38 then sounds on solo cello and horn in unison. Lavignac calls this motive the Distress of Tristan; Kobbé calls it Anguish. The motive has also been associated with "Isolde as Healer," a theme from the ancient legend that is emphasized by Thomas, and which occupies Wagner throughout the final act.

In the medieval tales Tristan's sufferings are symbolized by his wounds—wounds blamelessly acquired and excruciatingly painful, which only Isolde can heal. For Tristan, absence from Isolde is not just a lack but an existential disaster, and his need for her is symbolized by his physical decrepitude, until healed by her touch. With characteristic serendipity, Wagner seizes on this detail and incorporates it into his drama—but incorporates it as music. The symbolical character of the wound is brought vividly home to us without the narrative damage that it causes in the old digressionary tale.

The motive of Isolde the Healer also anticipates the tender concern of Kurwenal—revealed, as the curtain rises, bending over the unconscious form of Tristan, who lies on a couch within the precincts of his ancestral home of Kareol on the Breton coast. "The whole scene," Wagner writes in the stage directions, "suggests the absence of a master, ill-kept and here and there dilapidated and overgrown." From without comes the sound of a shepherd's chalumeau—an English horn played backstage—in a melody described by Newman as "one of the strangest and most poignant ever imagined by man." This solo melody (motive 39), for all its improvised character, is contracted into highly structured cells (a, b, c, and d in the motive example), which germinate separately in the scene that follows.

The lament ceases and the shepherd appears, asking if the master has awoken. Kurwenal expresses the fear that, should Tristan wake, it could only be to take leave of them forever. He then asks the shepherd if he has picked out a sail on the sea—the sail of Isolde, for whom Kurwenal has sent, knowing that she alone can heal his master, as she healed him once in Ireland. The shepherd replies that if he saw a ship he would play a merrier tune, and then asks what ails their master. "That you will never understand," says Kurwenal wearily, commanding the shepherd to return to his post and watch the sea. The mournful piping resumes.

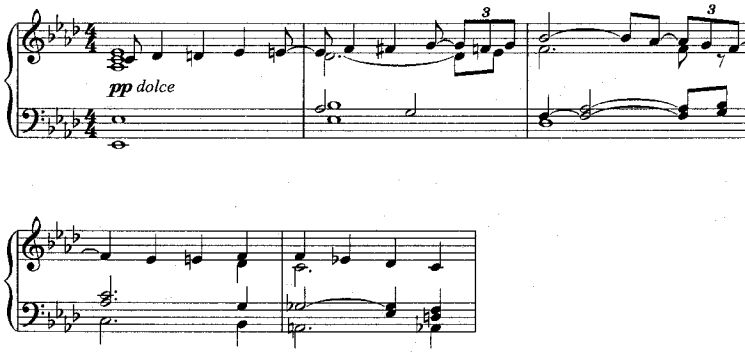
Tristan opens his eyes: "*Die alte Weise—was weckt sie mich?* The old melody—why has it awoken me?" He asks where he is and Kurwenal, greeting Tristan's voice with joyful relief, tells him that he is back home in Kareol (motive 40). The reply bewilders Tristan, and Kurwenal repeats it. Wagner takes advantage of Tristan's slow regaining of consciousness to fill in some of the missing background. Kurwenal describes the ancestral hall, Tristan's position as feudal lord, and the people who had continued to serve him faithfully, even after he turned his back on them and left for Cornwall. Laying his grizzled head on his master's breast, the warrior expresses his faith that here, at home in the land of his fathers, Tristan will be healed.

"You think so?" Tristan responds, "I know otherwise, though I cannot explain it to you." And then he describes the sunless region where he has been wandering, the place from which he drew his being and to which he is destined to return, the place of *göttlich ew'ges Ur-Vergessen* (divine, eternal, and primordial oblivion). Again we hear the sublime and solemn mo-

tive 35 and sense the peculiar intentionality of Tristan's death wish—a wish more general, more nourished by inherited grief and solitude than that of Isolde. Tristan and Isolde move toward the same end, driven by the same overpowering force, but from different beginnings. As we now discover this, the drama gains a new and surprising force, since it becomes the drama of two unique individuals and not merely the age-old story of forbidden love.

Tristan meditates again on the day, in whose light Isolde still lives, calling him back from the realm of night. Only if Isolde follows can he finally rest in the night: "I heard Death's door crash closed behind me; but once more it stands ajar, forced open by the sun's beams. I must seek her, with whom I must be united if I am to find release." These lines are sung to a reminiscence of motive 29. Tristan curses the day that will not let him rest: "When shall be quenched the beacon that keeps me from you? The torch—when will it die out?" He sinks back exhausted, to a soft reminiscence of motive 22a (ex. 3.9). Kurwenal, beside himself with grief and pity, confesses that once he had scorned and defied Isolde. Now however, rough and untutored though he is, he has understood that Tristan's wound could be healed only by the physician who healed the wound inflicted by Morold. He has therefore sent to Cornwall for her.

Tristan, who has lingered on the verge of consciousness during this speech, now starts up rejoicing. He embraces his vassal, sings passionately of Kurwenal's loyalty and devotion, and rushes forward in his thoughts to



Example 3.9

Isolde's imminent arrival: "It waves, it waves, the flag at the mast! The ship! The ship! It glides by the reef, do you not see it? Kurwenal, do you not see it?" In the excited music of this passage, old motives are metamorphosed completely by the force of Tristan's longing, so that motive 2, already reshaped as a diatonic sequence in the prelude to act 3, now occurs in the rhythmical and obsessive form of motive 41a. The passage comes to an end with a high octave violin tremolo on B-flat, as Tristan vainly tries to get Kurwenal to see the ship that he has conjured in his imagination: "Kurwenal, do you not see it?"

The answer is given by the shepherd's somber piping. Tristan, his mind now clearing, meditates on the old melody, familiar since childhood and associated with his own tragic inheritance. He had heard it as a child when he learned of his father's death, and again when he was told the still sadder tale of his mother's fate in giving birth to him. Tristan stands peering into the great well of grief that he bears within, and the shepherd's melody takes hold of his thoughts and weaves them into a continuous narrative of pain and isolation. It was this very melody, Tristan recalls, that sounded within him as he lay suffering from Morold's wound, in the boat that took him to Ireland. He unfolds his own version of the events that have led to his present despair, focusing at last on the drink, remembering the unquenchable fire that has held him ever since in torment. And whence came this drink and its anguish, from which nothing brings relief?

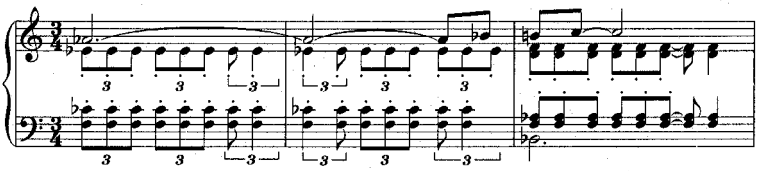
> I myself—I myself
> did brew it.
> From father's grief
> and mother's woe,
> From lovers' tears
> of long ago;
> from laughter and weeping,
> sweetness and pain—
> it was I distilled
> this poisoned bane.

Tristan's words convey a new insight into the destiny that has ensnared him. It was not the sight of Isolde that fixed his heart to hers. The long

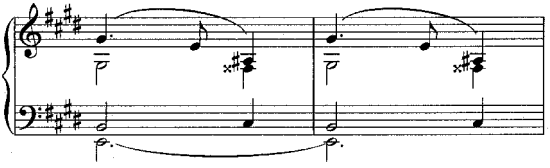
years of isolation—the inner grief and need behind his empty triumphs—had compelled this fatal love. Tristan's own self concocted, from the raw material of grief, the longing for Isolde and through her for death. When Tristan goes on to curse the drink and the one who brewed it, he therefore curses himself.

During this long passage the theme of the shepherd's pipe develops in a remarkable way, mingling with the motive of the sick Tristan and culminating in a new idea—motive 42—expressing Tristan's despair and his longing to be free from torment. The music weaves an intricate mesh of inner grief and solitude that fully acquaints us with the character of Tristan, his immovable sadness and his fateful tasting of the union-in-suffering toward which it tends. By the time Tristan has cursed the fatal drink of love, and himself as the one who distilled it, we know him completely, just as we knew Isolde at the end of act 1. You might ask, how does this work? How is it possible for music to convey the distinctive sadness that is Tristan's, when the words barely touch on it and give only the general impression of the situations that brought it about? I shall try to answer this question in the next chapter. The immediate reply is: Listen!

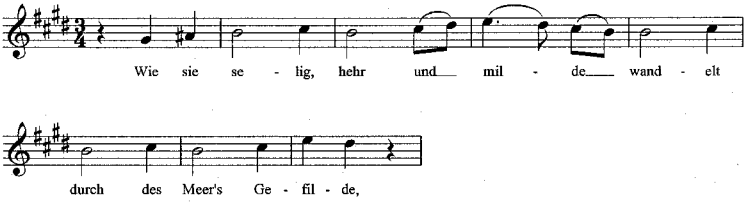
As Tristan sinks back, once again unconscious, on the couch, Kurwenal takes up motive 42 in anguish, denouncing love and its fearful enchantment: "See what reward has been earned by this noblest of men, who loved as no man ever loved before!" In despair Kurwenal listens for Tristan's breathing, while the orchestra, over soft syncopated Tristan chords, plays motive 2—the motive of Enchantment (at the same pitch as in the third measure of the Prelude, but resolved with a whole-tone step onto the dominant of E-flat—ex. 3.10). Tristan emerges again into consciousness, strangely serene in his new delirium. "Do you see the ship yet?" he asks, and Kurwenal assures him that it will come that day. Inverting all that he has just said about love and the drink of love, Tristan describes Isolde on the approaching ship, waving, drinking the cup of atonement, beckoning with sweet devotion. "Do you not see her?" he asks, as motive 29 is breathed out, in four-part harmony, on the horns (ex. 3.11)—a moment of measureless peace for which Alfred Lorenz offered an interesting analytical explanation (see the next chapter). The musical texture is enriched by new motives and melodies—example 3.12 and mo-



Example 3.10



Example 3.11



Example 3.12

tive 43—to create a dream of blessedness, of Isolde's tender, soothing, and releasing presence, bringing to Tristan the balm for all his longing. "The ship, Isolde's ship, surely, surely you see it? You must, you must see it!" he cries to Kurwenal, who is hesitating whether to reply truthfully when suddenly the English horn sounds from the stage a strident call in C major that breaks out, after a cry of joy from Kurwenal, into the unrestrained and exultant melody of motive 45.

Kurwenal excitedly describes the course of the ship as it makes its way toward the shore. "What flag? What flag?" asks Tristan wildly; "The flag of joy," is Kurwenal's reply. This cryptic reference to the black-and-white sails of the legend is not redundant. For Wagner has already given us the

musical equivalent of that old poetic image in the two themes of the shepherd: the haunting dark melisma that opens the act and the bright cry of joy that has now replaced it. By pinning this cry of joy, as it were, to the mast of Isolde's ship, Wagner helps us to envisage the utter dependence of Tristan on Isolde's arrival, and the total fusion in his own emotions of the life that she is bringing with the death that he craves.[20] As the ship disappears behind a dangerous reef, Tristan in his madness accuses Kurwenal of treachery. But the ship comes safely into sight, and Tristan now embraces his vassal as the truest of friends, commanding him to fetch Isolde from the shore.

The second scene opens with Tristan alone, delirious with excitement, staggering from his bed to greet Isolde and singing mystical words invoking their impending union—not in life but in death. The music tumultuously amalgamates material from the previous acts, generating from its sudden volcanic fury a version in rapid 5/4 time of the motive of Love's Peace (motive 29c). Tristan finally tears the bandages from his wound, so as to come wounded before her, "who can close my wound forever." Isolde's voice is heard, crying "Tristan! Beloved!" as the orchestra plays a version of motive 21—the ardent expression of Isolde's longing at the beginning of act 2, when it was she who impatiently waited for solace. Tristan's thoughts also go back to that other episode, deliriously imagining that he *hears* the light of the torch: "The torch dies out! To her! To her!"

Isolde enters and runs to him, the orchestra rising to a climactic crescendo as she calls out Tristan's name. Motives 1 and 2 arrest the violent movement, initiating a long diminuendo as Tristan falls into Isolde's arms, raises his eyes to hers, breathes out her name, and dies. The Look motive sounds in the orchestra for the last time.

Isolde clutches the body of Tristan, reproaching him in tender accents for fleeing before her into the night. Motive 38—Isolde as Healer—weaves itself into the delicate orchestral texture, along with reminiscences of the love music from act 2, and a singularly poignant new motive—no. 46—as Isolde implores her lover to wake once more and greet his bride. Then, convinced that he has indeed awoken, she sinks unconscious on his body.

Throughout this scene Kurwenal has stood by the entrance, speechless and petrified. A confused murmur of voices and a clash of weapons is heard from below. The shepherd, climbing over the wall, announces the arrival of a second ship. Kurwenal rushes to the battlements and cries out for assistance: Marke and Melot have come, and Kurwenal, beside himself with grief and rage, attempts to barricade the door. Brangäne is heard calling for her mistress, and then Melot stands suddenly before Kurwenal with a band of armed followers. Kurwenal utters an exultant cry and, falling upon Melot, strikes him dead. The king and his followers try to restrain the enraged warrior, but the confusion ends only when Kurwenal, mortally wounded, crawls to the dead body of his master and, taking Tristan's hand, asks forgiveness for following him.

This sudden violent episode of Kurwenal's uncomprehending resistance and pathetic death has been criticized as a gratuitous interruption of the drama—a melodramatic way of filling the stage with commotion so as to prepare the ground for Isolde's blissful ascent toward death. Kufferath, for example, describes the scene as *"un hors d'oeuvre peut-être nécessaire,"* meaning that it adds nothing to the drama's inner movement. It should be said in reply, however, that Wagner has filled the stage with the world of day and its imperatives, and has done so for a genuine dramatic purpose. We recognize that Tristan's love for Isolde has not merely brought death to Tristan. Its effect reaches beyond the lovers themselves to the daylight world in which they were imprisoned. Tragedy has come through this love to the simple Kurwenal, to King Marke and Brangäne, and also to Melot, symbol of the royal court. Tristan's is a love to which the normal laws of human happiness do not apply. But, seeing this love from the distance created by daylight, we accept it as a revelation of our own inner predicament. This love, and this death, we bear within ourselves.

There is also a deeper reason why Melot must die before the final and ceremonial death offering of the lovers, which is that a debt of vengeance remains unpaid. Until it is settled, the clouds of emotion cannot clear, as finally they do clear with Isolde's transfiguration. I shall return to this point in chapter 6.

King Marke grieves over Tristan's body, reproaching his nephew again

for betraying him—this time by dying before he could bring the message of forgiveness with which he had come across the sea to Kareol. Brangäne meanwhile has awoken Isolde and endeavors to explain to her that she had revealed the secret of the love drink to the king, who then wished to yield Isolde to Tristan as his rightful bride. The king too addresses Isolde, attempting in his simple-hearted way to show that he has renounced his claim on her and has wanted only to unite her with the one she loves. But Isolde is by now beyond communication with the living and, when the commotion has died down, fixes her eyes on Tristan's body and begins to sing the great hymn that Wagner called *Verklärung* (transfiguration) and which we know as the *Liebestod*. This rapturous evocation of the love object translates the once living Tristan into waves, clouds, scents, sounds, and finally into the "world-breath's billowing all," as Isolde sinks into the joyful and all-knowing unconsciousness that she invokes through her words.

These words are inspired by the Upanishads and by the Hindu doctrine of Nirvana—release from the world—as the highest state of being.[21] But they are not mere abstractions brought in to fill the God-shaped hole in the drama. They are palpitating expressions of a real and concrete love, with a mysterious and untranslatable power of their own. Moreover the words are buoyed aloft by such sublimely smiling music that this mystical transfiguration of flesh into spirit becomes entirely believable. The music effects what the words describe. It rises from the orchestra to swamp the stage, dissolving desire in renunciation, flesh in spirit, and time in eternity. As Isolde rests at last on the body of Tristan, joining him in death, and King Marke calls down a blessing on the lovers, the motive of Magic and Desire sounds on oboe and English horn at its original pitch, resolving the first chord of the opera by way of a plagal cadence in B major, the chord which was denied us at the end of the love duet in act 2 but which is now sounded on every instrument of the orchestra, apart from that pungent English horn that had cast the first spell. The effect is of an enormous breathing out of tension, a resolution that must surely be the most powerful in all music, having been summoned and postponed since the very first measures.

Wagner's story ends as the old legend ends, with Isolde and Tristan united in death. Following Wieland Wagner's Bayreuth production of 1962, opera houses have acquired the habit of representing the final transfiguration as a kind of glorious resurrection, so that Isolde does not die but rises with outstretched arms to greet the world, not unlike a football player who has just scored the clinching goal. This is one of many ways in which producers have tried to distort, satirize, or obliterate Wagner's message and to reduce the most sublime of modern dramas to a vulgar riot. There is a reason for this: The two experiences on which Wagner draws for his emotional material—erotic love and religious sacrifice—are no longer easily available to modern audiences without quotation marks. By offering the quotation marks, producers imagine that they have made the rest of the experience safe for us. In later chapters, therefore, I shall explore the philosophy of love, in order to vindicate Wagner's vision and to show that those quotation marks ought to be put where they belong: around the ears of modern producers.

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FOUR

The Music of Tristan

While conceiving the drama of Tristan and Isolde, Wagner discovered the philosophy of Arthur Schopenhauer. Both composer and philosopher had been deeply influenced by Kantian metaphysics; both were drawn to Hindu and Buddhist mysticism; and both were pessimists who saw renunciation as the highest human goal. Commentators have therefore made much of the influence of Schopenhauer on the philosophy of *Tristan und Isolde,* and rightly so. Less has been said, however, about Schopenhauer's influence on the music. Yet Schopenhauer was the only disciple of Kant to develop a halfway believable philosophy of music, and his theories had a profound impact on Wagner, whose reading of Schopenhauer fostered his conception of a drama that would unfold entirely through the inner feelings of the characters. These feelings, hinted at in words, would acquire their full reality and elaboration in music. Developing under its own intrinsic momentum, the music would guide the listener through subjective regions that were otherwise inaccessible, creating a drama of inner emotion framed by only the sparsest gestures on the stage—gestures that, for this very reason, would become so saturated with meaning as to reach the limits of their expressive potential.

Schopenhauer saw music as a unique form of knowledge, with a status among the arts that was both exalted and metaphysically puzzling. It is obvious that music has meaning, but equally obvious that it is not a form of representation. Unlike poetry or figurative painting, music employs no concepts and presents no narrative of an imaginary world. Its meaning is contained within itself, inseparable from the ebb and flow of its abstract

lines and harmonies. Kant had dismissed it as a mere "play of sensations," which pleases us in the way that patterns please us, by soothing the ear with symmetries and repetitions. But this judgment is merely proof that Kant had no musical ear. In listening to a great work of music, we feel that we are gaining insight into the deepest mysteries of being—although an insight that lives within the music and defies translation into words. Schopenhauer's theory offers both to explain and to vindicate this feeling and at the same time to exalt music to a metaphysical position matched by no other art form. Music, Schopenhauer tells us, "is the most powerful of all the arts, and therefore attains its ends entirely from its own resources."[1]

Simply put, Schopenhauer's theory argues that music acquaints us with the will—of which he gives an intriguing metaphysical account that I shall discuss in the following chapter. Will, for Schopenhauer, is the Kantian "thing-in-itself," the indescribable reality behind the veil of human perception, whose operations we know through our own self-awareness. The will cannot be known through concepts, since they provide us merely with representations and never with the thing-in-itself. Our inner knowledge of the will is therefore nonconceptual, a direct and unsayable access to the metaphysical essence. This nonconceptual knowledge is offered also by music. Unlike painting and literature, music is not a form of representation, nor does it deal in Platonic ideas, which are the common resource of all the other arts. Music exhibits the will directly. And this explains its power: for it also *acts* on the will directly, raising and altering the passions without the intermediary of conceptual thought. Through consonance and dissonance music shows, in objective form, the will as satisfied and obstructed; melodies offer the "copy of the origination of new desires, and then of their satisfaction";[2] suspension is "an analogue of the satisfaction of the will which is enhanced through delay";[3] and so on. At the same time, because music is a nonconceptual art, it does not provide the objects of our passions but instead shows the inner working of the will itself, released from the prison of appearances. In opera and song the words and action provide the subject matter of emotion; but the emotion itself is generated in the music. "In opera, music shows its heterogeneous nature and its superior intrinsic virtue by its complete indifference to everything material in the incidents."[4]

As it stands Schopenhauer's theory succeeds in vindicating the expressive power of music only by linking music to his conception of the will as "thing-in-itself"—a conception that I shall later argue to be untenable. Moreover, the theory is in danger of self-contradiction. Schopenhauer denies that music represents the will; but he also says that music "presents," "exhibits" *("darstellt"),* even offers a "copy" *("Abbild")* of the will, and what these terms mean is never explained. Moreover, if it is really true that the will is the thing-in-itself behind appearances, then nothing can be said about it. All meaningful statements concern representations and ideas. Music belongs in the world of appearance and is, indeed, nothing more than an appearance, which exists only for those with ears to hear it. Hence it is strictly meaningless to speak of an analogy between the movement that we hear in music and the striving of the will itself.

Nevertheless, these philosophical difficulties—which bothered neither Schopenhauer nor Wagner—do not affect the core of truth in the theory. Schopenhauer tells us that the nonconceptual awareness we have of our own mental states is really an awareness of the will; he also tells us that the will is objectively presented to us without concepts in music. In these two statements we can "divide through" by the will, to use Wittgenstein's metaphor:[5] reference to the will is an unwarranted addition to another, more intelligible theory, which proposes that in self-knowledge we are acquainted with *the very same thing* that we hear in music. To put it in another way: music presents subjective awareness in objective form. In responding to expressive music, we are acquiring a "first-person" perspective on a state of mind that is not our own—indeed which exists unowned and objectified, in the imaginary realm of musical movement.[6] In Eliot's suggestive words: "you are the music / While the music lasts."

So expressed, the theory casts useful light on the musical argument of *Tristan und Isolde.* The drama is not just a drama of passion: it plays out almost entirely in the subjective realm. The love that binds the two protagonists singles them out in exactly the way that each is singled out for himself, as a unique and indescribable selfhood, the source and subject of consciousness. The meaning of their love can be conveyed only if we can be led into the inner regions where it grows and flourishes—in other words, only if we can borrow the first-person perspective that is the

unique possession of each. And this we can do through music. It is self-evidently what is happening, for example, in the scene of Tristan's delirium in act 3, when the music unfolds behind the words a wordless landscape of grief and desolation, and leads us speechless through the labyrinth of Tristan's mind.

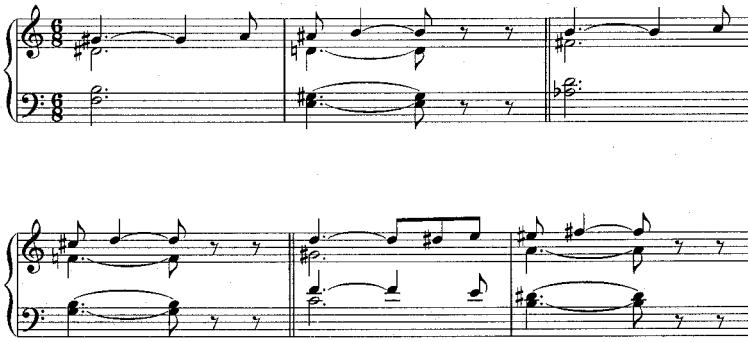
Debussy famously criticized Wagner's use of the leitmotif as a "visiting card," as though the motive had no other function than to remind the audience of who is discussing what on the stage.[7] Debussy's misunderstanding must have been deliberate, since he makes masterly use of leitmotifs in his opera *Pelléas et Mélisande*. Here, as in Wagner, the motives serve as musical magnets, around which meaning slowly accumulates in the course of the drama. Each motive works like a metaphor, coalescing with the dramatic idea and dragging it into the music, where it is subjected to a musical development so that the drama *evolves through the music*. If the motive were musically inept, a mere dictionary entry attached by convention to an action or character onstage, then it would not succeed in propelling the drama. It is only because Wagner's (and Debussy's) music is so intensely expressive, and so cogently organized as music, that it can perform its dramatic role, capturing the emotional and spiritual significance of what is happening.

In *Tristan und Isolde* this role is especially important because so little *is* happening on the stage. The magical transformation of the second act, in which impatient desire turns to death-directed renunciation, is accomplished almost entirely through the music, while the lovers remain statically face-to-face, uttering words fraught with paradox and disconnected from any plan of action. In a letter to Mathilde Wesendonck, Wagner referred to this long passage as revealing the secret of his musical form, implying that the emotional coherence and dramatic rightness of the transition are accomplished by a movement that is musical in origin and which obeys purely musical laws.[8] In short, it is development and not just the motivic "vocabulary" that provides the expressive meaning of the music, and any attempt to "decipher" *Tristan* merely by listing the motives and attaching a name to them—as was often done by early commentators—will miss the real source of its dramatic power. In this chapter, therefore, I shall consider musical development in *Tristan und Isolde,* exploring

the ways in which subjective states of mind are unfolded through the musical syntax.

Tristan has acquired the reputation, in retrospect, of a kind of farewell to classical tonality, a final jettisoning of the principle of harmonic organization that had guided Western music at least since the Renaissance, and which was based on keys and key relations. This reputation is not entirely misleading, but it is of course heavily influenced by later developments and in particular by Debussy's experimental approach to keys and scales; by the polytonality of Stravinsky, Bartók, and Szymanowski; by the atonal expressionism of Schoenberg; and by the same composer's attempts to break with tonality entirely through the twelve-tone serial system. Doubtless none of those experiments would have occurred had it not been for *Tristan*. But Wagner's harmonic language is only misunderstood if it is read forward into such as yet unthinkable developments, instead of backward into the great tradition from which it derives. For *Tristan* owes its peculiar harmonic power to the fact that it takes tonality to its emotional limit while obeying principles of organization derived from classical polyphony.

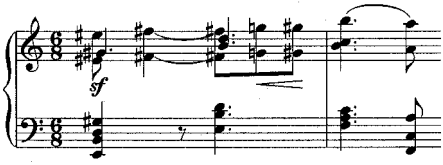
At almost every point in the opera it is possible to identify a tonal center. The opening measures, which begin on A (construed, however, as an upbeat), move through the "Tristan chord" (motive 2a) to the dominant seventh of A, and could be resolved without difficult on A as the tonic, the whole passage being naturally construed in A minor. The innovative character of the musical language is revealed in three features: the Tristan chord itself, which has no clear function in tonal harmony; the movement of the voices, all except one (the tenor) by way of semitone steps; and the fact that the dominant seventh is presented as a resolution—or rather, the best we are going to get by way of a resolution and therefore a way of postponing the resolution that it normally requires. The opening phrases (motives 1 and 2) are promptly repeated a minor third higher, leading to the dominant seventh of C; the phrases are then raised again by a minor third but prolonged by a semitone step and with the Tristan chord reassembled, with the tritone above and the fourth below, so that the harmonic sequence ends on the dominant seventh of E (ex. 4.1). The tonal center is there, but constantly shifting. However, the shift has a tonal



Example 4.1

logic. C is the relative major of A minor, and E is the dominant. Moreover, the three tones A, C, and E compose the triad or tonic chord of A minor. The whole passage is therefore what musicologists influenced by Heinrich Schenker[9] would call a "prolongation" of a simple chord sequence in A minor: A minor–C major–E major, and simultaneously the "composing out" of the A-minor triad. This is one reason why the passage, despite its electrifying refusal to resolve, possesses such a vivid sense of syntactical rigor.

Note, however, that each of the chords in the sequence A–C–E is only implied through its dominant seventh. The resolution of the first dominant seventh is postponed throughout this sequence, and follows only when the melodic line is toying with the tonality of F-sharp by way of embellishing the underlying B-major seventh (the dominant seventh of E). The E-sharp–F-sharp sequence in the melodic line suddenly becomes a suspension not on the dominant seventh of E major but on an altered E-major chord that is itself a seventh, and therefore the dominant seventh of A minor. The melody then moves forward to B, conceived as an appoggiatura onto A, so that everything moves at last, in the true manner of the Classical style, toward a resolution on the tonic (ex. 4.2, motive 3.) What we are given, however, is an "interrupted cadence," treating A not as tonic but as mediant. In other words the passage concludes on an F-major triad, with a highly dissonant suspension of the B-natural—which means that

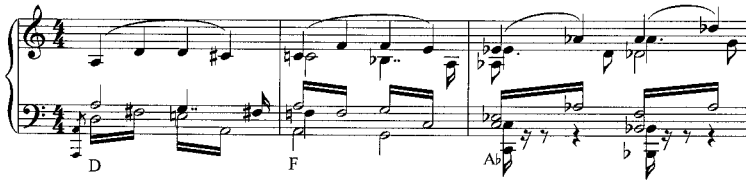


Example 4.2

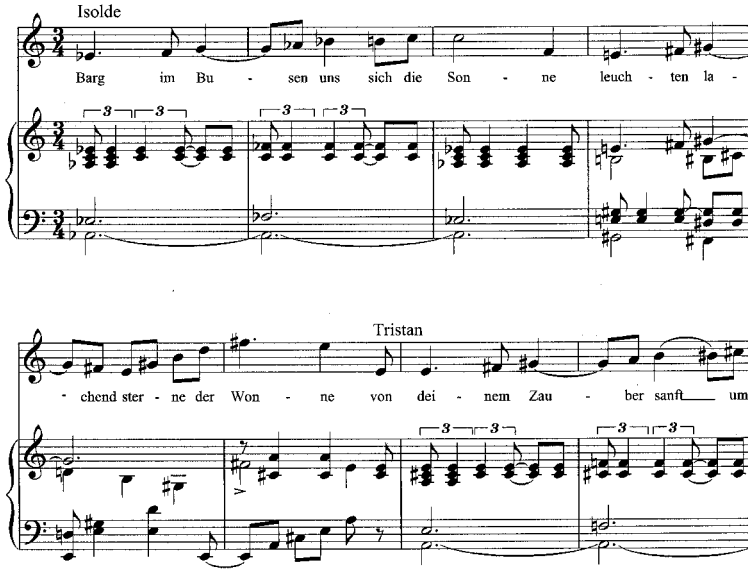
it is not resolved at all. The real resolution is again postponed and, we are gradually led to understand, will be postponed ad infinitum.

Although the music of Tristan is highly chromatic, it does not slide arbitrarily between tonal centers but rather respects the inherent relations between them. When there is a directly chromatic harmonic relation, as in the Death-devoted Head motive (no. 13), this chromaticism is felt as an aberration, a deliberate departure from the harmonic norm. The juxtaposition of A-flat major and A major jars us into the recognition that we are confronting something that cannot be accommodated—we are stepping out of the world of light and day and normality into that "undiscovered country, from whose bourn / No traveler returns." (It also serves to highlight both the A-flat and the A, together with the semitone clash between them, recalling the opening measures of the Prelude, in which an upbeat on A leads to the Tristan chord, harmonizing the conflicting tone of G-sharp/A-flat.)

Wagner tends to avoid the traditional circle of fifths, which enables a composer to pass easily from one key to its dominant or subdominant. In keeping with his principles of chord construction, he prefers relations of thirds, moving from one key to that of its mediant or submediant. We have seen this happening in the opening harmonic sequence as A passes to C and thence by another third leap to E (the dominant), which resolves in an interrupted cadence onto the submediant, F. The same principle of harmonic movement through relations of thirds can be found throughout the opera, notably in the *Liebestod* (ex. 4.3). What is unusual is not the use of these third relations but rather the extreme rapidity with which the music moves from one tonal center to the next. It is this harmonic fluidity, more than anything else, that creates the restless, unsatisfied, and endlessly



Example 4.3



Example 4.4

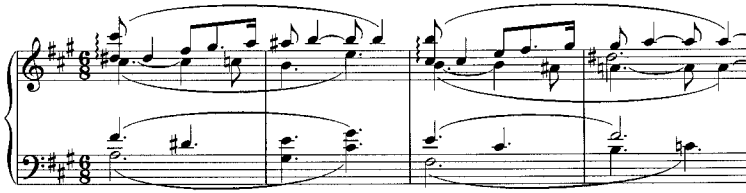
unresolved quality of the musical surface. No aspect of Wagner's music shows more dexterity than the ease with which he can pass through a succession of related keys, affirming none of them and so, in a sense, denying all, but without sacrificing an impeccable sense of syntactical order.

Relations of thirds enable Wagner to accomplish chromatic shifts without disturbing the music's organic flow. Witness example 4.4, in which Isolde sings her fragment of melody in A-flat, moving by submediant progression to E major. This quickly becomes the dominant seventh leading

to A major, in which key Tristan sings the same melodic fragment. This effortless transition from A-flat to A-natural exemplifies the secret of Wagner's "chromatic" harmony, which involves no renunciation of tonality and its logic but instead a refined exploration of its unpoliced regions.[10]

In Wagner a dissonance is almost always resolved—though often on to a lesser dissonance. Each of the three acts of *Tristan* opens with a dissonant harmony, and each is resolved, though in the first two acts only imperfectly. In act 1 a Tristan chord moves to a dominant seventh; in act 2 a major seventh chord moves to a diminished seventh (motive 18), and in act 3 a Tristan chord (construed as a B-flat minor triad with an added major sixth) is resolved via another passing dissonance onto the triad of F minor (motive 36). In each case the resolution is accomplished in such a way as to sound incomplete, and the ensuing music retains the tension by ensuring that as each dissonance is resolved another is created. This process continues throughout the opera until the magical ending, in which the opening Tristan chord is resolved onto an E-minor triad, which is then promptly construed as the subdominant minor of B major, in which key the work ends. This final sequence is all the more astonishing in that it makes suddenly apparent that the opening chord was not to be resolved after all in the A minor that it initially presented to us. Instead it is, as it were, lifted out of its own tonality to resolve a whole tone higher and in a major key—a harmonic reenactment of the transfiguration that has just occurred onstage.

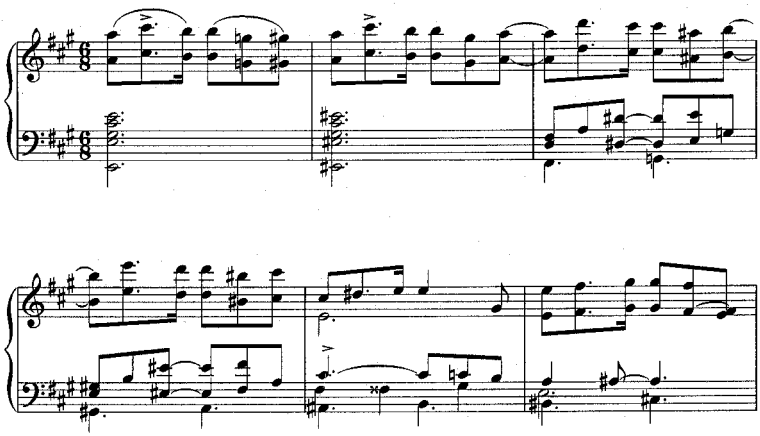
From the first days of polyphony, dissonance has been made part of the tonal language by the device of suspension, when one voice is held in position while other voices move to another harmony before the suspended voice moves to join them. This device, used with such consummate art by Victoria and Byrd, is also the standard use of dissonance in J. S. Bach, Couperin, Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven. In Wagner the device is complicated by the repeated use of diminished and half-diminished seventh chords as quasi-resolutions, as in example 4.5 from the Prelude. Here it will be seen that each quasi-resolution keeps the melodic line suspended free from the consonance that would finally resolve it, so that the melody seems to wander unsatisfied from place to place, its urgency constantly augmented as it fruitlessly seeks a point of repose.



Example 4.5

Suspension is one example of a general principle of Classical harmony, which is that harmonies should be composed not of chords, conceived as isolated musical units, but of voices moving under their own melodic impetus. Harmonic movement, in other words, is "voice-led" movement. This demand reflects the historical origins of tonal harmony in Renaissance polyphony. It also underlies the essentially grammatical character of tonality, in which each harmonic event is experienced as fully determined by the one that precedes it and as fully determining the next. (Contrast strummed chords on a guitar, or chord sequences generated on a synthesizer.)

This is where Wagner's use of chromatic sequences is so fundamental to his art. Voices that move by semitone steps lend a kind of inexorability to harmonies that may otherwise seem to be quite unrelated. We have already heard this effect in the opening bars of the Prelude, in which the dominant seventh of A minor is heard as a natural sequel to the keyless Tristan chord by virtue of the chromatic voice leading in treble, alto, and bass—and also, in the last statement of the sequence, in the tenor voice too. Chromatic movement in the bass line is a fundamental device in *Tristan,* used to buoy the structures above yet constantly disrupting them so that they topple onto their successors. We see this process in example 4.6 (the continuation of ex. 4.5), in which the bass rises through nine consecutive semitone steps while all the other voices constantly adjust to accommodate its inexorable movement but never quite succeed. The mastery here is shown in the fact that, while the bass moves chromatically, the upper voice, composed of two distinct motives, does not move chromatically at all but rather shifts position through diatonic scale degrees or thirds, thus retaining its essentially tonal character. Wagner



Example 4.6

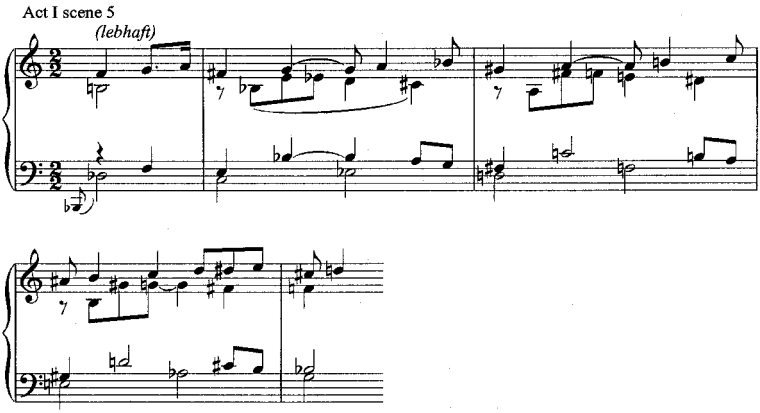
was not the first composer to write polyphonically in this way—there are early examples in Monteverdi's madrigals and Josquin's masses. But he was the first to use the device to extend musical paragraphs to such astonishing lengths, using only condensed and pregnant motives as his melodic material and creating natural-seeming relations between chords that cannot easily be related by the rules of Classical harmony.

In a celebrated study, Ernst Kurth emphasized two distinguishing marks of Romantic harmony: alteration and sequential segments.[11] Alteration, in Kurth's sense, means the chromatic inflection of a chord by raising or lowering one of its constituent notes by a semitone: as when the triad C–E–G is augmented to C–E–G-sharp. The altered note then acquires what Kurth called "leading-note energy"—a perceived tendency toward the position from which it has been displaced. Kurth maintained that the habit of altering diatonic chords reached a crisis in *Tristan und Isolde:* thereafter alteration proliferated so radically as to threaten the foundations of the tonal order. Thus the tonal dominant ninth chord, with the fifth altered both upward and downward by a semitone, is identical with the whole-tone scale. This alteration promptly cancels the sense of tonal center, and launches the music into regions that Debussy was to explore in his Impressionistic works.

Kurth's theory of alteration contains a core of good sense. But it puts things the wrong way around. Wagner's chromatic harmonies can often be understood as alterations of more straightforward diatonic chords. But they result in general from a fundamentally antidiatonic conception of harmonic sequence. In *Tristan,* movement from chord to chord is not as a rule governed by any real or implied relation between the roots of the chords, as it is in Schubert, Schumann, or Brahms. It may be entirely derived from a movement between neighboring semitones. The bass line may ignore root relations for measure after measure, as in example 4.6, moving by semitone steps that justify themselves, so to speak, after the event, as the structure that sways above them is held precariously aloft. This use of the semitone step can rightly be seen as the decisive moment in the creation of modern harmony.[12] In Wagnerian polyphony any chord can lead into any other, provided the voices can move from the first to the second by semitone steps. But the attempt to translate the resulting sequence into the grammar of root relations will often reduce it to harmonic nonsense. The contrast, in this respect, with Brahms is striking.

The use of sequential segments is illustrated by example 4.7 from act 1. The semitone movement in the bass is gradually raised (by major seconds and then a minor third), while the harmonic progression is raised in parallel: the first chord of each segment is an altered dominant, with what Kurth calls "leading-note intensification of the fifth"—thus G^7 with a D-flat, A^7 with an E-flat, B^7 with an F-natural, and so on. Although melody and harmony are raised simultaneously, suspensions and voice leading in the other voices create a continuous resisting medium through which the tonal center advances like a swimmer, shaping itself melodically as it goes. The harmonic relations here are therefore subordinate to the melodic movement and made natural and orderly by their contribution to the sequential flow.

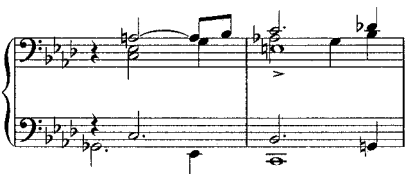
The sequence is defined by Kurth as "a melodic progression [*Melodiezug*] that consists not of tones but of . . . motives with their entire harmonic networks." The use of sequential episodes is (as I illustrate below) carefully controlled by Wagner. Never do they replace or abolish the tonal architecture, even if they have an important part to play in organizing the music according to dramatic, rather than symphonic, requirements. They



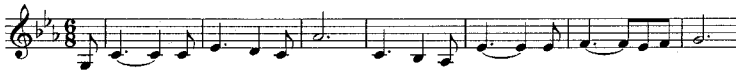
Example 4.7

are part of the way in which Wagner integrates musical and dramatic development by making them mutually dependent.

Another device singled out for emphasis by Kurth also deserves mention, and that is the Wagnerian habit of "resolving" a tension chord onto itself. An instance is shown in example 4.8 from the prelude to act 3. Here an altered dominant seventh chord is resolved by voice leading onto another version of itself (although a version without the flattened fifth). Instrumentation and inner voices are carefully managed to give a sense of forward and harmonically driven movement, even though the harmony in fact remains static—producing an effect of oppressed and mournful helplessness. This kind of quasi-resolution has great importance in the architectural framework of *Tristan und Isolde,* since it plants an unresolved tension in the memory and causes it to linger there, often to be resolved,



Example 4.8



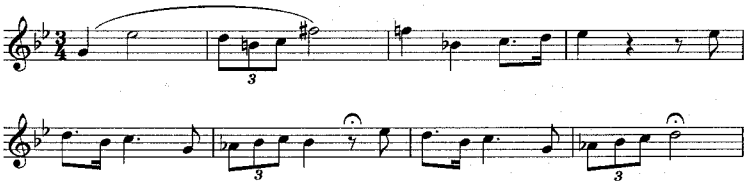
Example 4.9

as in this case, only many measures later. (The dominant chord wrestles bleakly with itself for fourteen measures, being reduced in the process to a spectral sequence of thirds on the violins, before resolving faintly and sadly to the F-minor melody of the shepherd's onstage English horn.)

The harmonic language of *Tristan* is matched by an entirely original approach to melody. In previous works, and in the early parts of the *Ring* operas especially, Wagner had shown himself a master of the diatonic cell: the clear melodic statement that owes its force, at least in part, to the harmonic consonances that are implied in its intervals and rhythmic order. (Consider Siegfried's horn call, or the theme, example 4.9, which is associated with Siegfried as hero.) These motives make use of "consonant leaps," to use the Schenkerian language, and their versatility and charm derive in large part from their harmonic clarity.

The melodic idiom of *Tristan* is completely unlike that of the *Ring*. Although Wagner does not give equal value to the twelve notes of the chromatic scale, he anticipates an idea that was to prove central to the development of twentieth-century music: the idea of the hexachordal cell. Many composers, whether or not under the influence of Schoenberg's serialism, have derived their thematic material by dividing the twelve-note set into two parts that can display symmetries equivalent to the question-and-answer phrasing of a diatonic melody. The two hexachords have no notes in common but nevertheless stand, it is hoped, in an intelligible musical relation so that the second can be composed into a response to the first.[13]

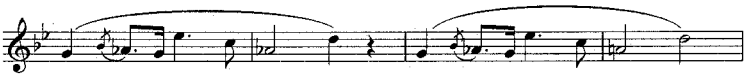
Wagner's hexachordal cells often resemble the first half of such a twelve-note theme. Having taken six different notes, often involving chromatic or dissonant leaps, and arranged them in a provocative statement, Wagner then creates an answering cell in which at least one note is foreign to the harmony implied in the opening hexachord, negating the movement and forcing individual notes to stand out from the melodic line



Example 4.10

with an added burden of expression. An example is the young sailor's melody that opens act 1—a melody which, for its atmosphere of wayward sadness, has few equals (ex. 4.10). It begins with a six-note phrase, the key of which is ambiguous—though generally assumed to be C minor with an F-sharp accidental preparing the way for the dominant. But the F-sharp, arrived at by a dissonant leap of an augmented fourth and straining to move upward to G, is at once negated by an F-natural, as the answering phrase blocks the harmonic movement, compelling us to hear B-flat major. This passes at once into E-flat major as a new diatonic cell presents itself. The melody proceeds in this way, shifting in key, meter, and rhythmic organization, until cadencing at last in B-flat major—although on an interrupted cadence in which the final B-flat is harmonized over a diminished seventh.

This melody anticipates the conflict that animates the music of the first act, by juxtaposing rhythmic diatonic phrases that represent the extrovert community of sailors against lingering, arrhythmic hexachords that have no obvious harmonic base. Another such hexachord is enfolded into the heart of the melody—also ending on a dissonant leap of an augmented fourth (ex. 4.11) and repeated at once with one note altered (A-flat to A-natural), again negating the implied harmony. Some of the motives are



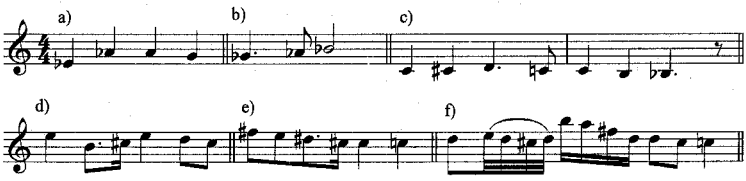
Example 4.11

organized in this way too, notably that associated with Isolde's Impatience in act 2 (motive 20), although most of them fall short of a full hexachord.

The young sailor's song exemplifies the way in which Wagner uses a single line of melody to suggest complex harmonic changes, so that even when unharmonized the melody can wander between keys, finding its home in none of them. The locus classicus of this phenomenon is the English horn solo of the shepherd in act 3—the *"alte Weise"* that finally awakens Tristan from his coma by reminding him of his dead parents and of the grief to which he is the resistless heir (motive 39). While this melody has some affinity with Near Eastern and Eastern European folk song, it marks a new departure in Western art music and one that has never been subsequently rivaled for its free but controlled elaboration. Like the sailor's song, it contains a diatonic episode that reappears as a separate motive (39b), along with free improvisations that play with the flattened fifth in a jazzlike manner (39d). Its overarching tonality of F minor is more clearly emphasized than the B-flat major in which the sailor's song ends, but the important motive it introduces (39b) begins in E-flat major and quickly chromaticizes itself, so to speak, into a cell more recognizable by its shape than by any specific intervals. It is as though the melody is in a constant state of germination, new cells growing within it and emerging as spores to sow their seed in the surrounding musical space.

While Wagner composes melodically throughout, there are very few self-contained tunes in *Tristan*. Melodies are constructed from cells of six notes or less, which can be detached from the context, rearranged, and woven into the fabric. The *Liebestod* exemplifies the process and shows how successful it can be in creating the impression of endless and inexhaustible melody out of repetition. The cells indicated in example 4.12 are woven through progressions of thirds, with widening and contracting intervals, to create a texture that is harmonically motivated from beginning to end.[14]

The melodic concentration in *Tristan* is inseparable from the rhythmic vitality of the motives. Wagner is not often thought of as a rhythmic innovator or even as a particularly rhythmic composer. That is partly because our ideas of rhythm have been shaped by the external ostinato rhythms of popular music, so that we have to a certain extent lost sight of the origins of rhythm in a melodic line. Wagner is actually one of the



Example 4.12

great rhythmists. This is so in spite and because of the fact that he hardly ever uses percussion as a rhythm-generating device. The timpani play an enormous role in *Tristan,* but it is a melodic role, consisting largely of prolonged tremolandi that swell the melodic line, suggesting huge reserves of unexplored emotion beneath it. And the instruments of the orchestra are used always melodically rather than percussively, even in the most frenetic passages such as that in which Tristan tears off his bandages, precipitating a kind of rhythmic catastrophe as the music strives to keep pace with his delirium.

Beethoven's architecture, in works such as his Fifth Symphony, violin concerto, and third piano concerto, depends upon repetition of rhythmic motives that can be detached from the melodies which first impress them on the listener, and can be reduced to purely metrical form. These motives, though recognizable from their rhythmic profile, are melodically generated. The four-note motive that sets the first movement of the Fifth Symphony in motion is not hammered out but "sung," with the G–E-flat interval absolutely integral to the effect. Even the repeated notes on the timpani that open the violin concerto owe their reverberation in the memory to the melodic and harmonic sequence that they prefigure, which lends them a half-cadential character.

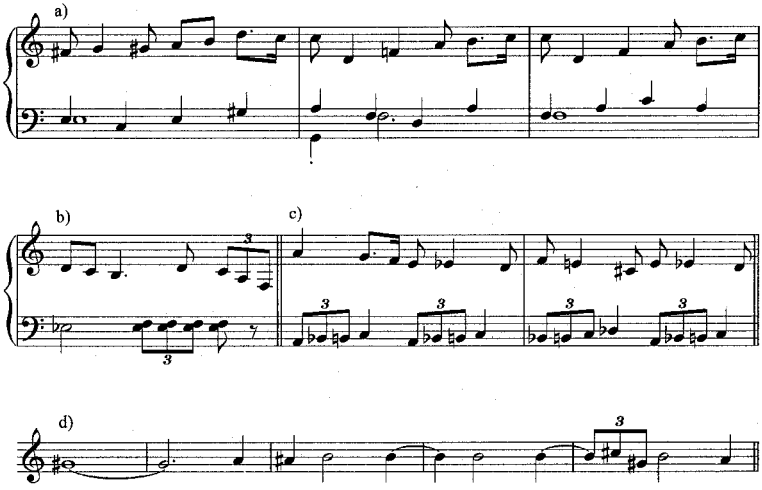
Wagner's motives in *Tristan* also have pronounced rhythmic contours. The cadence onto F major that finally sets the Prelude in motion (ex. 4.2) introduces the motive of the Look, the power of which is inextricably connected to the syncopated structure of its first three-note phrase (motive 4). This phrase places the accent on the weak middle beat of the triplet, while forcing the sixteenth note that follows to lean heavily on the first note of the succeeding measure. This rhythmic device is repeated

four times in the theme (motive 5) that is built from this cell, and is then taken up by no less than four other motives that appear in rapid succession thereafter (motives 6, 7, 8, and 10). Each of these motives is distinct from that of the Look, which is itself only a cell in the melodic phrase that it introduces. But we hear them as "developing variations," to use Schoenberg's idiom, of the Look motive, since the rhythmic magnetism of the syncopation sounds through them all, attracting and repelling with the same unmistakable force.

In the Classical style the closures imposed by tonal melody and diatonic harmony are aligned with rhythmic closures reinforced by bar lines. In *Tristan* all three forms of closure are minimized or avoided entirely, for they are symbols of a law-governed order that the lovers' passion has undermined. Hence the motives that take up the rhythmic organization of the Look involve ties across bar lines, offbeat accents, and the ubiquitous fracture in the triplet, together creating a rhythmic profile that cannot be understood apart from the melodic pulse from which it first derives. The Prelude to *Tristan* shows how "the tyranny of the bar line" can be escaped: by making the bar line the effect rather than the cause of the rhythmic organization. The bar line crystallizes, so to speak, from the melody that flows across it.

Whereas Beethoven's rhythmic motives have a pronounced downbeat emphasis (as in the first movements of the violin concerto, the third piano concerto, and the Fifth Symphony), in *Tristan* the emphasis is almost invariably off the beat or canceled by a syncopation. Indeed, it is no exaggeration to say that Wagner's treatment of rhythm in *Tristan* has the same subversive effect as his treatment of melody and harmony. Ties across bar lines, offbeats, syncopations, and triplets break down the meter so that it loses its character as a regular pulse and instead of controlling the melody is controlled by it. Example 4.13 shows four instances of this rhythmic freedom: these examples are not arrhythmic; rather they show rhythm responding to the impulse of passion rather than the laws of the world. Rhythm in *Tristan,* like melody and harmony, has become "inner."

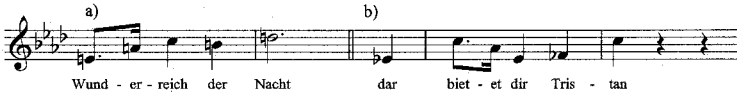
At the same time, the music of *Tristan* is intensely rhythmic. Motives and melodic phrases have a pronounced metrical organization, which makes them recognizable through changes of spacing, harmony, and tes-



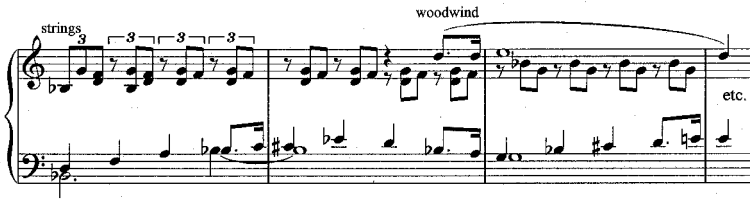
Example 4.13

situra. Thus motives 11, 21a, 24, and 36b often appear in compressed or expanded form, with intervals and harmonies altered but nevertheless retaining their identity by virtue of their sharp rhythmic profile. The rhythm has been internalized: it remains locked within the motive itself, part of its inner movement. This movement may spread into the surrounding musical space—as the Look motive spreads its movement through the Prelude to act 1—but is not derived from any external metrical pulse. It is generated from within the musical movement and would be inconceivable apart from the tonal organization of that movement, which endows it with its ongoing flow.

Since rhythm is generated within the melodic cell, Wagner can use it to connect motives that are melodically and harmonically remote from each other, and so display deep emotional connections between things that seem on the surface to have little or nothing in common. A striking instance of this occurs in the last scene of act 2, when Tristan urges Isolde to follow him to the land of death, and the rhythmic pattern established by motive 35 (ex. 4.14a) is suddenly transferred to the melody of motive 29 (ex. 4.14b), while the tonal center moves, via F minor, from A minor to A-flat major. Thus Tristan effortlessly presents Isolde with the connection be-



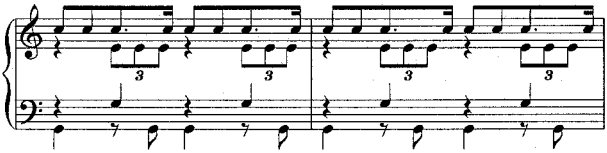
Example 4.14



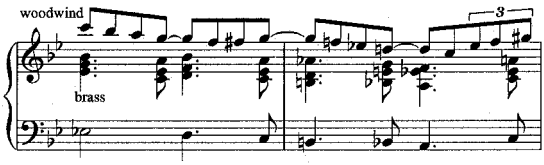
Example 4.15

tween death and love's peace, in a passage that also recalls, in retrograde, the harmonic progression of the Death-devoted Head motive (no. 13). This formidable dramatic condensation is achieved by the most gentle musical flow, in which rhythmic organization is the principal connecting device.

The Classical style builds excitement through ostinato and emphatic downbeats. Wagner's climaxes depend instead upon the repetition of rhythmic cells, often with offbeats and dotted rhythms that wind up the springs of the music. Consider the passage that follows Isolde's impatient extinguishing of the torch in act 2, which works up to a climax of anticipation. The impetus here is rhythmically derived, first from the offbeat motive on the strings, set against the symmetrical rhythm of the principal melodic line on which is superimposed the tense rhythmic call of the woodwind choir (ex. 4.15, motive 25). Wagner works this pattern to a climax, interrupts it with two lax bars that convey Isolde's confusion, and then initiates a wholly new polyrhythmic structure whose principal elements are notated in example 4.16 and which is submerged only when the lovers meet and embrace. At this moment the music undergoes a kind of rhythmic catastrophe, with heavy dotted quarter notes on the brass impeded by tied eighth notes on the woodwinds (ex. 4.17). This rhythmic idea, which has already appeared in the prelude to act 2 as the internal organization of motive 22a, wonderfully captures the confused entangle-



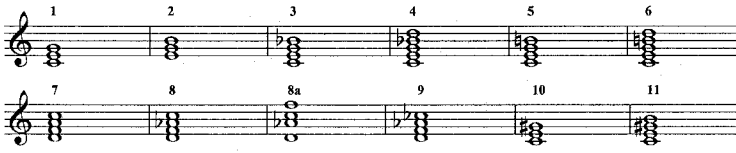
Example 4.16



Example 4.17

ment of the lovers' embrace. Its occurrence here as the climax of the relentless polyrhythm that precedes it is once again subversive. Instead of ending on a decisive downbeat, the music unwinds through a series of tied upbeats, undoing any sense that the excitement belongs to external reality or to the world of others. All this turmoil, the rhythm tells us, is an interior drama of human hearts. (An even more striking instance of polyrhythmic organization can be found at measures 164–75 of act 3, when Kurwenal starts up in excitement at the sound of Tristan's voice, and four complex rhythms are established simultaneously.)

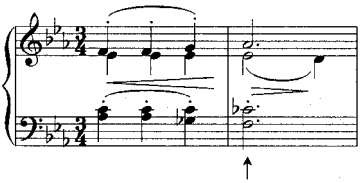
It has been a recognized principle, at least since Rameau's *Traité de l'harmonie,* that the interval of a third (both minor and major) is not merely a consonance but also the fundamental building block of Classical harmony.[15] Although it is impossible to squeeze the third into those mathematical theories of consonance that impressed the Pythagoreans and their many Platonist and medieval followers, it slowly established its precedence over the other intervals through its ability to control polyphonic movement. The use of thirds can result not merely in the three-voiced consonances of triads, but also in a vast number of graded dissonances, all of which bear intelligible relation to the triads that compose or resolve them. Some of these multiple third chords are shown in



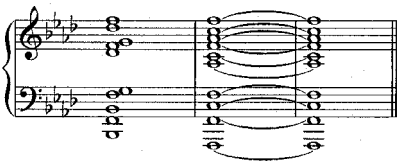
Example 4.18

example 4.18. These form the core vertical structures of Romantic harmony, in both its Wagnerian and its Brahmsian development.

One particular third chord (no. 8), with its second note transposed up by an octave (8a), so as to divide the chord into an augmented fourth below and a pure fourth above, is orchestrated by Wagner to create that unique and unclassifiable sound we know as the Tristan chord. This chord can be described as a half-diminished seventh, resolving (here as elsewhere in Wagner) onto the dominant seventh of a key to which it does not itself belong. This dominant seventh is not fixed in advance of the context. For example, the Tristan chord that resolves onto the dominant seventh of A minor in the Prelude later resolves onto the dominant seventh of E-flat major in the passage following measure 866 of act 3, in which Kurwenal listens for the breath of the exhausted Tristan (compare ex 4.1 with ex. 3.10.) Attempts by Hugo Riemann, Kurth, and others to see the chord as an altered subdominant or an altered dominant of the dominant, and so to assign to it a Classical harmonic function in each of its many contexts, are interesting but ultimately groundless.[16] Wagner uses this chord to create an entirely new harmonic function—one not previously exhibited in the classical repertoire. Other composers had hit on the Tristan chord before Wagner: Beethoven, for example, in his Piano Sonata No. 18 in E-flat Major, op. 31, no. 3, first movement, measure 36 (ex. 4.19). But none had used it as Wagner used it, as an interloper in the sequence of diatonic harmonies, inviting them to move chromatically to a destination they do not imply. (In the Beethoven example, the chord is a half-diminished seventh on the way to the diminished seventh that replaces it.) The point of the Tristan chord is that it is truly rootless and can be understood only in terms of the chromatic voice leading that leads toward and away from it, and which it strangely and poignantly arrests. It is ill at ease yet stationary, standing iso-



Example 4.19



Example 4.20

lated in the music like an outsider at a gathering. If we provide the chord with a root, we change its identity. As an altered subdominant minor it has a well-known function in Classical harmony, exemplified in the concluding cadence of Schubert's Fantasy in F Minor, D. 940, for piano four hands (ex. 4.20). But Schubert's chord is not the restless, outsider sound that we hear in the opening bars of *Tristan und Isolde;* it is firmly rooted on the subdominant, and the G-natural is already looking for the F—the tonic—as its resolution. Such examples illustrate an important point in the metaphysics of music—namely that chords, notes, and sequences can be acoustically identical and yet entirely distinct as musical objects.[17]

The Tristan chord contains within itself (directly or by inversion) all the intervals of the chromatic scale save one (the minor second–major seventh, which would change it from a stable to an unstable dissonance and therefore undermine its function). No single one of these intervals dominates the chord, in the way that the fifth dominates the triad or that the third dominates other seventh chords. This partly explains the effect we encounter at the outset of the Prelude, in which the upper note of the chord—here G-sharp—is profiled and given an enhanced melodic value, completely forbidding the listener to hear the note as a passing tone or appoggiatura. (There have nevertheless been many attempts to construe it

as such, in order to rewrite the chord sequence in terms of Riemann's functional analysis.[18])

Some of Wagner's most striking melodies turn out, on examination, to be lingering meditations on third chords and their relations—for example, motive 26 ("O sink hernieder"), which derives from one of the Wesendonck songs; motive 27, which illustrates the use of the Tristan chord to slide between contrasting altered triads of E major, taking in F minor and A-flat major on the way; and motive 46, in which the melody slides down a diminished seventh chord and then up a minor triad, with a change of harmony from a minor ninth to a Tristan chord and a change of key center, accomplished solely by semitone shifts, from G to F.

The Tristan chord owes its strange lonely character in part to its instrumentation, which deliberately breaks the chord in two and brings out the hollow character both of the fourth above (plangently sounded on oboes and English horns, with the cellos in their alto sonority) and of the augmented fourth (tritone) below, sounding on bassoons and low clarinets. We hear the steely consonance of the fourth starkly set against the sour dissonance of the tritone, and the effect is one of pain and longing. This is but one small example of Wagner's skill in imparting color to his harmonies. It also shows that, for Wagner, the third chord is not a harmonic block but a confluence of polyphonic voices, and this is how he treats the whole orchestra. Wagner's music is as colorful as any in the nineteenth-century repertoire. But (unlike much of Rimsky-Korsakov, say) it is not merely "colored in" by the instrumentation. On the contrary, Wagner's aural richness derives from the separate orchestral voices, plotted with all the logic of a Bach contrapunctus. The vertical order of his harmony works hand in hand with a horizontal order in the instrumental parts, each of which has its melodic logic as well as its potential for individual expression.

Consider the magical moment in the *Liebestod* when one by one the violins (divided in four) take up the melody over tremolando lower strings and soft third chords on the horns. This passage (act 3, measures 1629 et seq.) sounds like a pure ray of orchestral color; in fact—and this lies at the root of its power and of the utter conviction that the orchestra can give to it—each voice moves melodically, and each somehow transfigures the overall melodic line. As Isolde falls briefly silent, the entire choir of wood-

winds enters on a beautifully spaced diminished seventh, the double bass sounds E-flat pizzicato, and the harp arpeggiates the chord from the same E-flat—all creating the softest of musical cushions for the chromatic extension of the melody on cellos and tremolo violas, Isolde finally joining in with a tender variation. This consummate musical evocation of a transfigured smile is achieved without subordinating any of the parts: each weaves into and out of the chromatic melody with the same conviction, and even the double bass is given its own echo of the ascending chromatic phrase as the episode runs out of breath and gives way to the original melody. This chromatic passage effects an effortless modulation from A-flat major to the B major in which the opera will end—and the harmonic shift is heard as "natural" precisely because no instrument has any unmelodic interval to encompass. The orchestra *sings* its way from A-flat to B major, and each instrument joins in and affirms the song.

The music of *Tristan,* I have tried to show, has a distinct and immediately recognizable syntax.[19] Wagner also provides that syntax with a vocabulary: the table of motives that I have listed in the appendix. A Wagnerian motive (leitmotif) is a fragment of music with a memory. It retains and transforms its remembered input as the drama unfolds. For example, the Look motive, which is given a full elaboration in the Prelude, is the first orchestral utterance in act 1 (as though erupting from Isolde's unspoken thoughts). It is outlined caressingly by the solo viola in that central dramatic episode when the disarming look of Tristan is recalled. And in act 3 it sounds significantly (at the pitch of its first appearance in the Prelude) as Tristan looks into Isolde's eyes and, dying, utters her name. Everything about this motive adapts it to the metaphysical mystery of desire, which links eye to eye and, in the same moment, I to I. The motive repeatedly and obsessively returns to a remembered event—an event, moreover, that preceded the action on the stage and which also propels it.

The motives in *Tristan* are quite unlike the "characteristic" motives of the *Ring* cycle, being devoted to the expression of an inner life rather than to the depiction of an epic mythological saga. Hence they grow out of each other and into each other in ways that make it difficult to isolate them musically or to assign to each of them a complete and independent

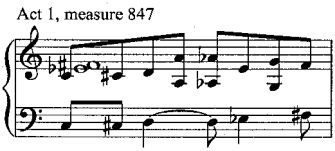
significance. Motive 4, for example, represents a varied retrograde of 1, of which 2 is a prolonged inversion. While early commentators—drawing on hints in the Wesendonck correspondence—assign 1 to Tristan, 2 to Isolde, and 4 to the Look that joined them, the very intimacy of their musical connection both confirms this interpretation and also subverts it, by entwining the motives too closely to permit any concrete symbolism. As the musical tapestry unfolds, 1 becomes Sorrow and 2 Magic; 1 shapes itself as the masculine outsider, 2 as the feminine desire that enchants and consoles him: and so on.

These musical links make figurative interpretation hazardous; but they are also vital both to the musical architecture and to the unified atmosphere it conveys. The dotted rhythm contained in the Look motive is used to link it to four successive motives built on the same rhythmic skeleton. Motive 6 rearranges the minor seventh and minor third intervals from which 4 is constructed in order to form an answering phrase; 7 rearranges fragments of 6, and 8 fragments of 7, and so on. Motive 13—the Death-devoted Head motive—attaches three bold chords by way of a preface to 3, which is itself a prolongation of 2. Motive 16—which accompanies Isolde's narration of the events that first entangled her with Tristan—is a prolongation of 1, the motive of Sorrow, and therefore a prolonged inversion of 2, the motive of Magic, while 36, the brooding motive that opens act 3, is a diatonic variation of 2.

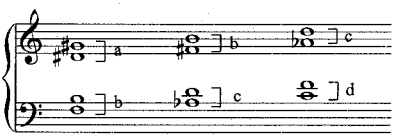
The motive of Isolde's Anger (12) offers a particularly interesting example. While unmistakably angry in mood, it is directly derived from the two yearning motives that open the Prelude, beginning from an extension of motive 2 and then proceeding by repetitions of motive 1. The derivation from motive 2 is brought out by Wagner himself in the course of Isolde's narrative (ex. 4.21, in which motive 2 is "extracted" from 12 by octave doubling in the bass). The chemistry which combines motives 1 and 2 into 12 is simultaneously musical and emotional: Wagner is making us hear the transition from unacknowledged love to uncomprehended anger. There are other examples, too, in which an emotional transition is symbolized by a connection of motive. Thus the Day motive (18) picks up the first phrase of 15—Tristan as Hero—suggesting that the heroic posture is in some way a threat to love; and 12, the motive of Isolde's

Anger, is suggested in retroversion in 21b, which conveys the thorough softening of the fierce girl of act 1 into the woman of act 2.

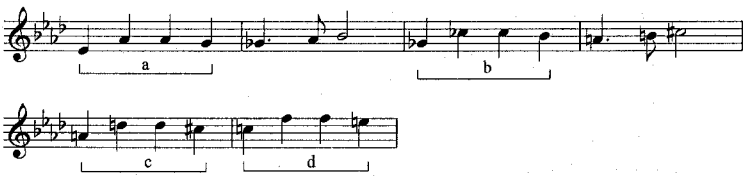
The process of thematic synthesis culminates in the *Liebestod,* whose sublime and seamless-sounding melody is composed from the cells indicated in example 4.12 (p. 91). Example 4.12a is a variant of motive 1; example 4.12b is a whole-tone variant of motive 2; example 4.12c is composed from motive 2, followed by 2 in retrograde (which is identical with 2 inverted); example 4.12d contains a reminiscence of motive 17; example 4.12e is a variation of motive 22a; and example 4.12f, having introduced new material with the gruppetto (motive 31), ends with another inversion/retrograde of motive 2. Finally, as Barry Millington has pointed out, the melody opens out the three successive Tristan chords that began the Prelude, normalizing the augmented fourths into their perfect forms (ex. 4.22.)[20] The intertwining of sorrow and yearning, of solitude and en-



Example 4.21



Example 4.22a

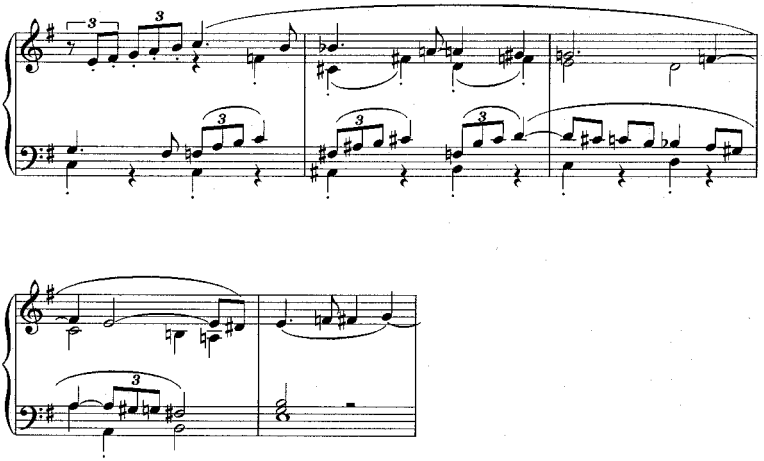


Example 4.22b

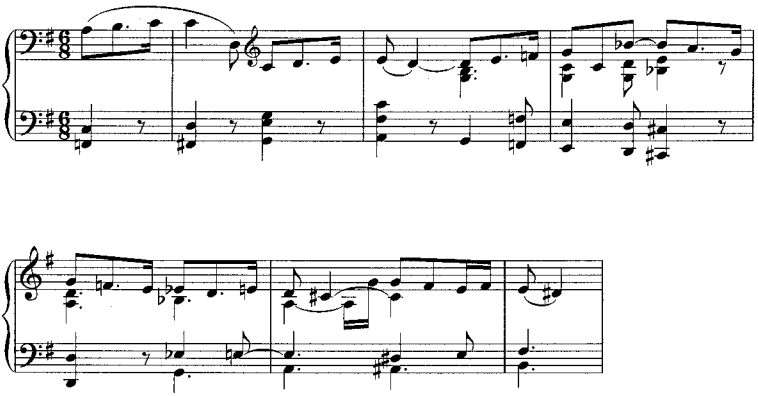
chantment, of Tristan and Isolde, are all here completed in a melody that seems to emerge from the dense package of those opening bars and flow out in an infinite, expanding wave of free emotion. The pent-up anxiety with which the work began is finally heard to contain within itself the serene redemption with which it ends.

The relation between the opening motive associated with Sorrow (1) and the Sick Tristan (16) shows how chromatic and diatonic tendencies may coexist within a single motive. This relationship also has an important dramatic function in connecting the subversive (chromatic) desire that has enraged Isolde with the normal and womanly (diatonic) feelings from which it arose. Motive 16 begins with the chromatic sequence of 1 and adds a contrary chromatic motion in the bass, which jointly create an impression of almost keyless instability. As Isolde's excitement and indignation dwindle to pity and tenderness, however, the music reshapes itself toward a diatonic conclusion, in a manner typified by the iv–V–i cadence in E minor in example 4.23. This soothing of the chromatic movement by coaxing it into a gentle and conventional cadence conveys the natural and nuptial quality of Isolde's emotion. But the moment of stability is immediately canceled, as the final tonic becomes the first note of motive 2 and the music once again chromaticizes itself. Throughout this extraordinary narrative the dialogue between chromatic desire and diatonic tenderness continues, and the listener is awoken simultaneously to the subversive quality of Isolde's feelings, and also to their naturalness and normality. Those critics who see Isolde as some kind of neurotic either do not listen to this narrative or else are deaf to what the music transparently expresses.

Wagner's melodic thinking is so dense that the motives cling to each other like the elements of a single organism. Part of the process of meaning acquisition consists in linking each motive to definite events or ideas in the action. But much of it resides in establishing musical links—harmonic, melodic, and rhythmic—whereby the music meditates on the offered fragments of external reality and transforms them into things remembered, pondered, and felt. Consider again motive 4, which provides the rhythmic pattern, the melodic cell, and also the harmonic movement from which the Prelude is largely constructed. The chromatic movement in the bass is fundamental to the language of *Tristan;* but while the bass



Example 4.23



Example 4.24

moves upward through a semitone, the tonal center is shifted through a whole tone from F to G, the F-sharp being part of the dominant seventh chord of G. The motive therefore moves simultaneously by both chromatic and diatonic steps—a feature that is repeated when the concluding phrase is varied over chromatic shifts in bass and inner parts while the tonal center is again raised by a whole tone from A to B (ex. 4.24).

Although listeners may not be able to describe what is going on here, it is certain that they will hear and respond to it, and come to understand the original motive differently as a result. The music acquires a character of inexorable onward movement that, while briefly brought to a stop in a perfect cadence in the home key of A, is at once recommenced as motive 6 takes up the harmonic and melodic challenge. Motive 6 is in fact a synthesis of 4 and 2—of the Look and Magic—and is introduced over a Tristan chord. It is as though Tristan's look has taken in the force of magic and so amplified its power. Wagner, still shifting tonal center by whole-tone steps, finds a new way to combine the vestigial elements of the Look and the Magic motives, in a motive (7) that seems to taunt and tantalize in an obsessive way. This musical synthesis is not effected merely by adding one motive to the other: the motives are, as it were, dissolved in the same harmonic solution and then crystallized out as a compound cell. We can never hear the Look motive thereafter without also hearing the movement that it presages. And when, as in the critical passages, this movement does not follow but remains, as it were, suspended in the orchestra, we are thrown suddenly into the heart and mind of Tristan or Isolde, knowing from within, just as they do, the predicament that is theirs. The eerie stillness of the Look, in the passage where Isolde first refers to it, is due largely to the fact that the intense musical development of the Prelude has filled the motive with subliminal movement. We are being made to share in Isolde's fatal entrapment, recognizing that what has happened in that quiet, sudden meeting of eyes is nothing and everything.

The Look illustrates the difficulty of separating the harmonic and the melodic dimensions in Wagner's motives. The melodic line sketches a harmonic progression that is endorsed in the bass; without that progression the motive would be incapable of sustaining the elaborate musical architecture which it is used to build. Other equally impressive examples include the Day motive of act 2 (18), which appears in its most emphatic statements as a progression from a major seventh chord to a diminished seventh via a chromatic movement of a semitone in the bass; and the motive sometimes called Fate, sometimes Poison, which accompanies Isolde's demand that Brangäne prepare the *Sühnetrank* (drink of atonement) which is to settle her score with Tristan (9). Carl Dahlhaus has described

this last as a *"musikalischer Rätselbild"*—a musical puzzle picture.[21] The motive, he points out, cannot be detached from the chord sequence in the upper voices; but this sequence is harmonically undecipherable and "unfounded." It therefore endows the three-note motive with the character of a lower voice *(Unterstimme),* even though it is not heard as the bass line to the harmonic progression. The point here can be taken further. The Fate/Poison motive owes its character not just to its melodic shape, instrumentation, and pitch, but also to the way in which it is heard to well up from somewhere beneath the musical surface. By placing it beneath this unusual (but within a chromatic context unproblematic) movement from a seventh chord of B to another seventh chord on D-sharp, Wagner makes the motive emerge from the accompanying harmony, even though pitched far below it.

Wagner's music strikes the ear as tightly organized and bound in a seamless unity. It is not merely that every part speaks clearly through the shifting orchestral texture; nor that the orchestra is, despite its scale, used with utmost—almost chamberlike—delicacy; nor that the surface arises from the dexterous permutation of interlocking motives. The listener also has an irresistible sense of unity, comparable to the great architectonic achievements of Bach, Haydn, and Beethoven. This is so in all the mature music dramas, but nowhere more than in *Tristan und Isolde*. It is as though the whole work—music, words, and drama—flows with an inexorable logic from that initial chord, as it hungers for its resolution and finally, four hours later, achieves it in another key.

Early commentators were so impressed by this magical sense of unity in the Wagner operas—and especially in *Tristan und Isolde*—that they set out in search of musical explanations. The most famous of these commentators was Alfred Lorenz, whose four-volume work *Das Geheimnis der Form bei Richard Wagner* (The Secret of Form in Richard Wagner) sets out to analyze the mature operas as symphonic structures built from "periods," each of which is a self-contained and purely musical unity and which are held together in an all-embracing organic whole. The impulse behind this kind of analysis comes originally from Wagner himself, who not only entertained a lifelong ambition to excel as a symphonist but also declared

himself to be the successor of Beethoven and his music dramas to be the logical consequence of the formal rupture with absolute music accomplished by Beethoven in the Ninth Symphony. Moreover, in *Oper und Drama* Wagner refers to the "poetic musical period" *(dichterisch-musikalische Periode)*—i.e., a passage in which a single mood is developed musically—as the true unit of meaning in his dramas,[22] a remark that inspired Lorenz to look for tonally unified and thematically ordered periods as links forming the symphonic chain that binds the whole.

To many critics this search for large-scale musical form has an antiquated air. The unity we hear in Wagner's music, they suggest, is entirely sui generis, dependent on the dramatic context and not to be reduced to some purely instrumental model. So far as it goes, that response is incontrovertible. But it does not go very far. In particular, it leaves open the questions of how the musical process in Wagner relates to the dramatic process, and why the two come so effectively together in a unique synthesis of tone, word, and gesture.

One aspect of the comparison with Beethoven is undeniable: Wagner's music, like the music of Beethoven's mature symphonies, sonatas, and string quartets, involves constant development and variation of small-scale motives. And these motives are fraught with rhythmic and harmonic, as well as melodic, implications. Moreover, like Beethoven, Wagner often uses these motives to generate the background pulse of his music—as with the fractured triplet of the Look motive in all its obsessive repetitions throughout the Prelude.

On the surface, however, Wagner did not obey the kind of large-scale formal constraints of a symphonic writer such as Beethoven, whose adoption and adaptation of the Classical structures were essential to his architectonic thinking. Moreover, symmetries of key and measure, strophic forms, variations, sonata form, and related devices do not of their own lead to the wondrous unity of the Beethoven symphonies. There are as many formless as unified sonata-form movements, and those elementary musical structures discerned by Lorenz—notably the arch or Bogen form (ABA) and the bar form (AAB)—can as easily sound shapeless as unified.

Indeed, a philosophical and methodological difficulty stands in the way of all attempts to provide a theory of aesthetic unity of the kind ad-

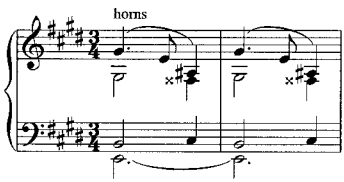
vanced by Lorenz. Many writers, faced with the seamless unity displayed by *Tristan und Isolde,* and finding no obvious explanation for this effect in the superficial features either of the drama or of the music, attempt to discover the explanation not in what is apparent but in what is *hidden*. This tendency is suggested by the title of Lorenz's work: form in Wagner is described as a "secret" *(Geheimnis)*,[23] and the theory is presented as a kind of revelation that aims to explain an experience of unity by showing that the entire work exfoliates from certain elemental structures. The problem arises as soon as we ask ourselves whether a periodic analysis of Wagner's opera—showing the key center and the thematic and episodic symmetries within each period—would actually provide such an explanation. Surely it could do so only if the existence of sustained tonal centers and thematic and harmonic symmetries were a sufficient condition for musical unity—an untenable conjecture for the reason mentioned in the previous paragraph. Tonal center and strophic form are exemplified by virtually all modern pop music, most of which is utterly formless.

Moreover, the critical relevance of Lorenz's "findings" is seldom clear. Normally, if a critic describes the formal properties of a work of music, it is with a view to capturing what we hear (or at any rate, what we can be made to hear) and what, once heard, imbues our experience with a new satisfaction. Form, for the critic, is never a *Geheimnis* but rather a vivid experiential fact, which needs only to be pointed out to be heard and enjoyed by the listener. With Lorenz's periodic structures and background tonalities, however, it is unclear that we are really being presented with what we hear, or ought to hear, in the music. For Lorenz, the three statements of motives 1 and 2 that begin the Prelude are not to be understood as repetitions of a cell in which two distinct motives are locked mystically together. The pauses, he argues, are like the pauses in a slow-movement melody—part of the theme. The whole consists of a *"Hauptthema"* (principal theme), which he notates in 4/4 time with the motive of Magic/Longing excised as a mere ornament with no part in the thematic structure. The theme is complete when it comes to rest with a "feminine" half-cadence on A; the motive that Lorenz calls the *"Verhängnismotiv"* (Fate motive) (3) is merely the closure *(Schlussfall)* of the whole "first subject," which follows bar form—AAB. To suggest that this is how we ought to

hear the music, when the whole fraught atmosphere depends upon our hearing something else—namely, the inseparable coming together of those two opening motives, and the derivation of the music from their repetition and variation against the background of the unresolved half-diminished harmony—is surely to miss precisely the peculiar and individual form of Wagner's music. It is to miss the magic and the potency, too. Lorenz unlocks the secret only to find that it has vanished.

Something similar occurs with Lorenz's attempts to find a tonal center for the opera. Lorenz believes that all the mature Wagner operas have a single key center, in just the way that a classical symphony has a single key center, with related and subordinate tonalities prevailing in the inner movements. *Tristan und Isolde,* however, begins in A minor and ends in B major: so what is the "real" tonal center? E major is Lorenz's answer; the opera, he contends, begins in the subdominant minor and ends in the dominant—but this is simply the "composing out" of a long "Phrygian cadence," the *Liebestod* being a prolonged coda on the dominant chord, the tonal argument having ended before Isolde's transfiguration. This explains, Lorenz triumphantly adds, the "ineffably peaceful effect" of Tristan's vision of Isolde in act 3 (ex. 4.25), since it is the first and only genuine homecoming to the tonic in the entire work and the only occurrence of an E-major chord that is properly independent and grounded.[24] Lorenz's interpretation invites the obvious response that the tonal center, in *Tristan und Isolde,* is not the permanent framework that it is in the Classical symphony, but rather a constantly shifting background. If the search for a ruling tonic leads to a single unproblematic and "grounded" occurrence of the tonic triad, then this simply proves that the search was misguided.

In expressing skepticism toward Lorenz's enterprise I am adopting



Example 4.25

what has become a fashionable position. But it is also increasingly fashionable to give Lorenz credit for his insistence that there is more to Wagner's musical language than meets the ear, and that there is a musical thought process at work which cannot be reduced to the permutation of motivic cells. As Robert Parker and Carolyn Abbate put it: "Lorenz maintained that Wagner's music was not simply leitmotivic chitchat; he insisted stubbornly and loudly that it was ordered into patterns and controlled by musical procedures that had nothing to do with the unavoidable referential obligations of all operatic music."[25] While few now accept Lorenz's particular division of the opera into periods, a movement has arisen among critics toward identifying background tonics and pitch complexes sustained over long musical spans. Robert Bailey, Patrick McCreless, Reinhold Brinkmann, and others have all tried to substantiate Lorenz's basic intuition that there is a hidden tonal order in Wagner's music which unifies large time spans by generating the musical surface through lawlike procedures.

This suggestion is of course redolent of Schenker, who believed that the masterpieces of classical music were all derived by the "composing out" of a single "background" cadence through "middle-ground" structures that generate the musical foreground. This generative process involves harmonic and melodic transformations of a hidden *"Ursatz"* ("fundamental structure"), itself a combination of perfect cadence and descending scale. Schenker represented his "transformational grammar" in elaborate graphs that have exerted a fascination over musical scholarship in our times not unlike the fascination exerted by the Ptolemaic cosmology over medieval astronomers. Schenker himself did not believe that Wagner's wayward and chromatic musical argument could be subsumed under his theory—a fact which he regarded, characteristically, as condemning Wagner's music rather than refuting his own theory. Others, such as Brinkmann, Wintle, and Bailey, have used Schenkerian graphs to trace stable "middle grounds" in the extended passages that they have discussed. As I argue elsewhere, however, these graphs should not be read as revelations of a "hidden" order in the music, from which the audible surface is generated in some rule-governed way, but simply as critical tools that may help us to hear more clearly what is there on the surface.[26]

There is no need to enter this controversial terrain in order to understand Wagner's compositional techniques in *Tristan und Isolde*. The only real dispute is between those, like Carl Dahlhaus, who believe that Wagner's "poetic-musical periods" are relatively short, like the breaths taken in the course of the action, and those, like Lorenz and his followers, who think of them in the terms appropriate to a Brahms or Bruckner symphony as extended musical arguments, in which material is presented and developed within a coherent tonal frame and with only extrinsic guidance from the drama. And both sides to this dispute are right: sometimes the periods conform to Dahlhaus's model; sometimes to Lorenz's. As an example of the latter, consider the prelude to act 3. The tonal argument of this section is wholly within the norms of the Romantic symphony. It opens with three statements of a iv–i cadence in F minor (motive 36), from which the violins wander upward to settle high on the dominant (37). A sequence then begins on III (38), sinking by chromatic steps in the bass and whole-tone steps in the treble onto the dominant seventh, at which the music pauses. The whole process is repeated, coming to an end this time on the altered V^9 chord in Example 4.8, which is then resolved onto itself again and again until, weary with its own dissonance, it releases the sad flight of the violins, which bring the music to a frail resolution on the tonic, preparing for the entry of the English horn onstage. What is original here is the extraordinary sound world achieved through eerie orchestration, altered chords, and the techniques of sequence and quasi-resolution. The tonal framework is Classical, organized by the principal chords of the key, and the whole remains within Lorenz's bar form—AAB. The A sections contain three episodes each: the dragging variation of motive 2, the ascending thirds on the violins, and the sequence motive (38), which forms a kind of second subject. The B section consists of the obsessive quasi-resolution of the V^9 chord, followed by the ascending thirds, which return to resolve in the home key of F minor. It could be said that the very recognizability of the prelude's form serves to highlight its strange and haunting sound world in a way that no formal novelty could match.

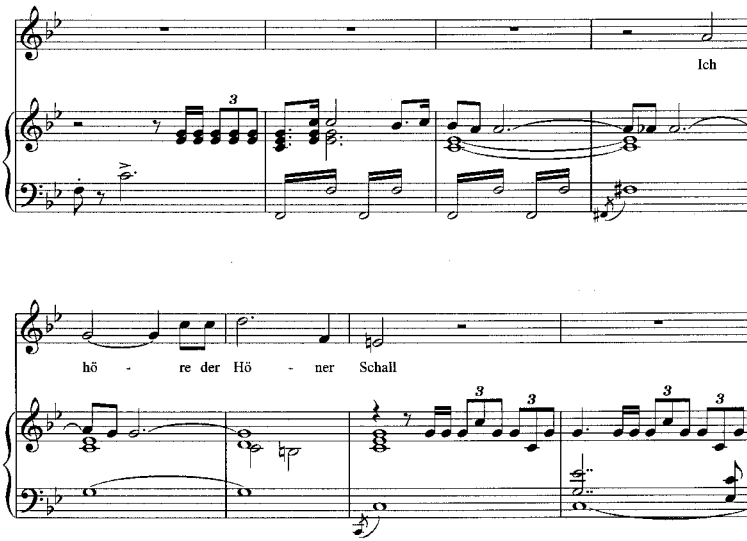
When we turn our attention to the act 1 prelude, however, we find another and more microscopic kind of order, akin to that of a Bach inven-

tion, in which everything germinates from one or two basic cells. The three successive statements of the opening motives form a harmonic synopsis of the key of A minor, yet one that avoids the home chord of that key. They affirm the key by concealing it and so introduce the listener to the harmonic process that will propel the work as a whole. Furthermore, these statements introduce the Tristan chord as a decisive structural feature. Early commentators often tried to read this chord in functionalist terms—as an altered seventh on B (Kurth) or an altered chord of D minor (Riemann)—so as to fit the quasi-resolution that follows into a Classical model.[27] But a chord that can be analyzed now as a version of B major, now as a version of D minor, is clearly not an altered form of either. In effect Wagner is forcing the listener to hear this chord as sui generis: spacing, instrumentation, and voice leading situate the chord in a sound world of its own, so that the G-sharp cannot be heard—as those early commentators wish us to hear it—as an appoggiatura leading to the A that follows, but rather as the unmoving apex of the harmony. With this chord Wagner is not merely announcing his new harmonic language; he is also isolating a single note, detaching it from the surrounding melodic texture, and, to speak plainly, *dramatizing* it.

The three statements of the Prelude's opening motives also introduce the chromatic scale. The first statement moves by chromatic steps from G-sharp to B; the second from B to D; the third from D to F-sharp. The melody lingers at this point before acquiring its final impulse in motive 3, which is a prolongation and resolution of motive 2 and which completes the chromatic scale on G-sharp before introducing two further aspects of the Tristan idiolect: the interrupted cadence, and the shift of tonal center by a third from A to F. Finally, the threefold statement of the basic material, while musically economical and tightly organized, is self-evidently dramatic rather than logical or argumentative in its form. At one level the passage is a succinct statement of the cells from which the musical structure will germinate: a chromatic scale on G-sharp, cunningly harmonized to expound a triad on A and so providing the melodic and harmonic basis for the Prelude, while dramatizing the two notes, G-sharp and A, which will be pivotal throughout the opera.[28] But the long silences, the spare repetitions, the hollow instrumentation, the dynamics and tessitura all

help to create an effect of intense and inexorable drama, so that musical logic and emotional stress are inextricably woven together. Henceforth all musical development will be interpreted irresistibly by the listener in dramatic terms, while the drama will be bound in an intricate and logical symphonic argument. Wagner, like Racine, has made passion move with the orderliness of syntax.

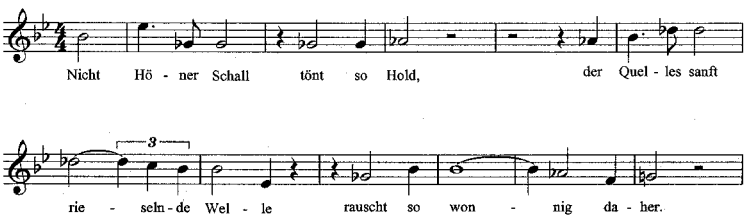
As an example of the short poetic-musical period, in which the emphasis is precisely on the poetic rather than the musical substance, consider Isolde's justly celebrated refusal to hear the hunting horns when Brangäne warns her that they are still within earshot (ex. 4.26)—a passage to which I have already drawn attention. The C-minor triad of the distant horns mingles with the bass F in the orchestra to form a ninth chord that effectively neutralizes the horns, depriving them of their distinctive tonality and softening them into the background. When Brangäne warns of their reality, the bass shifts a semitone to F-sharp while the treble falls to A-flat, initiating a Neapolitan shift into C minor, which briefly foregrounds the horn call on the open fifth. But the strings take over the



Example 4.26

sound and soften it; soon it has become a gentle rustling, C minor has shifted imperceptibly into a ninth chord on A-flat—i.e., the dominant of D-flat major—and Isolde sings an exquisite melodic line expressing what she hears, making clear that what she hears is inner, inaccessible to us, part of an enchanted landscape where no one but she and Tristan can intrude. This period leads naturally into the return of Isolde's Waiting motive in D-flat and effects a change of mood, putting the hunt at an impassable distance from the drama until the fateful moment when it bursts into the place where the lovers are embracing.

Such a poetic-musical period shows the essential simplicity of Wagner's musical language. The melodic line (ex. 4.27) dwells on a hexachord before breaking its repose on a foreign note (G-natural)—harmonized, however, with an E-flat seventh over a prolonged A-flat pedal to produce the typically Wagnerian effect of quasi-resolution. Two carefully prepared key changes—from F major to C minor, and then to D-flat major—are used first to bring the hunt into relief and then to bury it more deeply in the twilight. The explanation for the changes of key is not to be found, however, in any independent musical logic of the kind that could be exploited in some grand symphonic argument. It lies in the drama, and in the subtle shift from Brangäne's to Isolde's way of hearing things. But then again, the drama would not be intelligible without the music. It is the orchestra that conveys to us the enchanted landscape which breathes in Isolde's ear, and it is only because we hear the world with her inner ear, so to speak, that the drama makes sense to us. The passage shows precisely why there is a "secret" of form in Wagner: namely, because the form is not musical but dramatic, and the drama is not verbal but musical.



Example 4.27

When trying to understand the structure of Wagner's mature operas we should certainly attend to the periods where they can be identified, and acknowledge what the music is telling us when it seems to sustain a mood, an impression, or a gesture over an extended time span. But we must also recognize that there is in Wagner, as in all great dramatists, a division between poetry and prose—between the heightened moments of expression in which the inner life is revealed as an object of the highest sympathy, and the moments of pure narrative that propel the drama from one significant instant to the next but which avoid drawing attention to themselves, like disciplined servants at a gathering of dignitaries. While Wagner avoids the classical distinction between aria/ensemble and recitative, he nevertheless frequently has recourse to recitative-like elements by way of moving the action forward. (See, for example, the dialogue between Kurwenal and the shepherd that opens the third act.) And the first scene of the opera, brilliantly constructed though it is, is written in heightened prose, in order to present the character of Isolde before showing the peculiar predicament that has so enflamed her. Attempts to explain the music's unity and integrity which make no distinction between these prosaic passages and the expansive episodes to which they lead inevitably misrepresent the true source of unity in Wagner's opera: the drama.

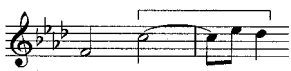
Here, then, is how we should understand the structure of Wagner's music. It is, first and foremost, a dramatic structure, and its symmetries are dramatic symmetries. At the same time—and preeminently so in *Tristan und Isolde*—the dramatic movement is not imposed on the music but generated within it. This is made possible by the devices discussed above: by the use of motives that magnetize the dramatic context and draw its meaning into themselves; by the interweaving of motives in obsessive tapestries; by the shifting of tonal center through voice-led chromatic movement and third progressions; and by the use of sequences and quasi-resolutions, which cause the music to move as human feeling moves, not by rational steps but by steps that rationalize themselves only after the event, in acts of self-affirmation. The unity achieved is dramatic unity—in other words, a demonstration in music of the inevitable course of human passions, of their climactic resolution, and of the redemptive aftermath that may still them utterly.

At the same time, this dramatic unity is not achieved at the cost of musical order but rather is a *form* of musical order. Both at the micro and macro levels, Wagner weaves his music together according to its own orderly syntax. I have tried to show this in two short examples—the prelude to act 3 and the opening measures of the prelude to act 1. But the real "secret of form" in *Tristan* lies in the process whereby the techniques of musical germination exemplified in those instrumental passages are used to advance the drama. This is what we find preeminently in act 2, where the transition from the here-and-now of erotic love to the eternity of renunciation is accomplished through a musical process in which each idea is a direct syntactical continuation of the preceding one. No Lorenzian analysis of this act in terms of tonal center and periodic structure could possibly capture the real source of its unity, which is the complete identity between the passions declared by the lovers and the musical movement through which they are captured, transfigured, and presented in quasi-symphonic form. Surprising at the best of times, the move from passionate love to serene renunciation defies translation into words or gestures. But by endowing Tristan and Isolde's love with an inner musical dynamic, Wagner is able to drive it to this strange conclusion. The drama is propelled by a musical logic, the terms and connectives of which have by this point become so clearly established in the listener's ear that every transition seems inevitable. Dahlhaus has succinctly summarized Wagner's approach to musical form by contrasting form as architecture (Brahms, Bruckner) with form as tissue (Wagner, Debussy).[29] One might extend the simile by saying that Wagner's tissue is woven onto a strong dramatic frame.

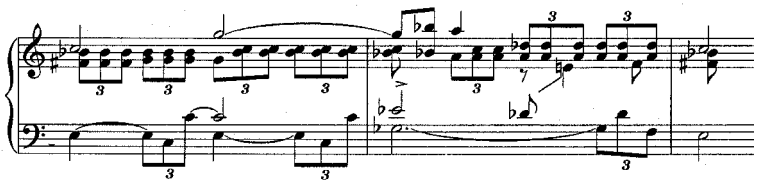
This brings me back to the point from which this chapter began. I suggested a unique dramatic role for music, not merely in the exposition of subjective states of mind but in the presentation of a first-person perspective upon them. That Wagner's musical syntax is especially fitted to this task should by now be obvious. However, a concluding example will help to elaborate the point, while finally putting to rest the idea that there is a "secret" of form in Wagner that can be understood from the tradition of purely instrumental music. The passage I shall consider begins at measure 626 of act 3. Tristan has risen from his couch, persuaded that

Isolde's ship is approaching, virtually commanding Kurwenal to see it. The high tremolando on the violins suddenly drops an octave and becomes quiet; the mournful tune of the shepherd sounds from the stage, playing with motive 39d and then, when Kurwenal has bleakly announced that no ship is to be seen, beginning again with motive 39a as Tristan lapses into delirium. As the English horn embarks on 39a for the second time Tristan begins his long evocation of what this *"alte ernste Weise"* ("old solemn tune") has meant to him.

The English horn melody wraps itself around his monologue, while fragments detach themselves from it and drift through the orchestra. The music paints the world with Tristan's sadness, makes sadness ubiquitous and inescapable, by scattering these fragments through the entire orchestral space. And the shepherd's melody undergoes a peculiar transformation: gradually the emphasis is transferred to the four-note opening phrase and in particular to the three-note cell marked in example 4.28. A constantly shifting and chromatic bass line captures the melody and brings it in, so to speak, from the outdoor air of Kareol, gradually infecting it with the peculiar, individual grief that is Tristan's. The four-note phrase takes on the character of anguish, of a man beating his head against a wall. To use T. S. Eliot's idiom,[30] it becomes the "objective correlative" of a unique inner condition, and by following it we gain access to Tristan's state of mind as he begins to rage against the longing that has entrapped him, and also, by implication, against the orphan emotions that fitted him for just such a fate. The phrase sounds shrilly above the orchestra as he recalls the drink that Isolde offered him, and then, in a remarkable passage in which he deliriously concludes that he himself brewed the drink that poisoned him, the shepherd's melody is split in two and the two parts sound simultaneously—the plangent opening phrase and the free improvisation played heavily in the bass (ex. 4.29.) When Tristan curses the drink (motive 42), the four-note phrase comes back again



Example 4.28



Example 4.29

to sound piercingly above his curse (measure 835)—the last sound in Tristan's mind as he lapses into unconsciousness.

It is of course fruitless to try to put into words what such a passage says—for strictly speaking it does not *say* anything. The knowledge brought to us by music is not "knowledge by description," to use Russell's idiom, but "knowledge by acquaintance."[31] We are being made aware, by purely musical means, of Tristan's emotions as he himself suffers them. We first heard this shepherd's melody sound from the stage as part of the outward furniture of Kareol. When we hear its musical fragmentation, we have the sense of an "invitation" into Tristan's way of hearing it. This is no longer music played or heard, but music recollected. And it is taking us back into the reaches of Tristan's past, making us feel the inevitability of his fate and the blamelessness of his passion. It is helping us to know Tristan from within, as a victim. And the depth and individuality of Tristan's character is shown by the way in which the theme changes under the impact of his consciousness, loses its folklike character, reveals painful angularities and hidden chromatic dissonances. Kareol ceases to be a stage set for us and becomes the scene of a lonely childhood, of a maturation through suffering, and of personal loss.

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FIVE

The Philosophy of Love

Much of the literature of courtly love is abstract and allegorical, reflecting in a general way on love, desire, and marriage, without attaching these things to concrete individuals and their fate. Such is *Le roman de la rose,* for example, and Chaucer's *Parliament of Fowles*. But those works also define erotic love as a predicament of rational beings, who desire each other as individuals and for whom love is a "singling out," at one and the same time a choice and a destiny. The high-toned Neoplatonism of Chaucer, Boccaccio, and their contemporaries therefore goes with a new-found interest in the "heroes of love"—those who have undergone exemplary trials on behalf of their passion. In treating the stories of Tristan and Troilus, poets were consciously placing the particular before the general, and the suffering individual before the fallen kind.

They were also reflecting on a philosophical question, one inherited from Neoplatonism and Avicenna,[1] but a question that the sacramental view of marriage had brought into relief. Succinctly put, the question is this: To what part of the human being does erotic love belong—to the body or to the soul? If to the body, then what part does rational choice play in our sexual emotions, and how can they be disciplined, refined, and controlled? If to the soul, then what part does the body play in the expression of love, and is carnal union really the goal of it? And if carnal union is the goal, is erotic love simply a form of concupiscence, a bodily appetite like hunger or thirst?

These questions were not new. They had troubled Plato, too, and through Neoplatonist writers such as Boethius and Avicenna, Plato's in-

fluence was exerted over the entire literature of courtly love. Those who regard this literature as reflecting the parochial concerns of a passing social order often fail to see that its questions are still with us, even if we need another language to express them, and even if Platonic and Christian conceptions of the soul are no longer tenable. We are rational animals; but which part of our being—the rational or the animal—moves us to erotic love? And which part of us, if any, is fulfilled by love, and how?

Such questions had an added force for medieval writers on account of the Christian doctrine of charity. Christ reduced God's commandments to two: love God entirely, and love your neighbor as yourself. But if love can be commanded, then love must be a choice. It must involve voluntary actions and voluntary thoughts. The New Testament word for love—*agape*—is translated as *caritas* in Latin and charity in our own authorized version of the Bible. It is a technical term designed to accommodate the revolutionary idea of love as a duty.

The first question in the minds of Christian writers about erotic love, therefore, is whether *agape* and *eros* have anything in common.[2] Erotic love is a destiny; yet we experience it as we experience choice—as a commitment of our whole being, fortified by reason and hemmed in by scruples. It is doubtful that nonrational animals can feel such a thing, since they lack the thought on which it seems so critically to depend—the thought of the other as a freely choosing self like me. In that respect erotic love resembles charity, but in that respect only. Medieval writers were troubled, and rightly troubled, by the features that set this love apart and which challenged the Islamo-Christian conception of our rational nature. Charity is offered freely and rejoices when its object finds love elsewhere. Erotic love is jealous, can abide no competitors, and may turn to hatred when the beloved loves or desires another. Charity seeks to give; erotic love seeks to possess.

When St. Thomas Aquinas writes of love in the *Summa Theologica,* he takes Christian charity as his paradigm and has no difficulty proving that charity is a voluntary action of the rational faculty.[3] He conceives love as willing another to exist—and this idea became, in due course, central to Roman Catholic theology. God's love was the great "yes!" that created the world. Through friendship I endorse another's being; in domestic love I

look on my family with the eye of affirmation, saying "it is good that you are." This thought can be trained and enhanced by habit, and it is to such a habit that Christ commanded us.

This idea of love is undeniably beautiful, and it is not surprising that it has survived into modern times as a general theory applicable not merely to Christian charity and the love of God but also to the love that has its roots in desire.[4] But to generalize in this way is to ignore the problem. Erotic love is as likely to deny as to affirm the existence of its object, and if Wagner's *Tristan* shows nothing else, it at least must convince us that there is a kind of erotic love that has nonexistence as its secret or not-so-secret goal. Erotic love, moreover, is more like an affliction than a choice, and the fact that it leads of its own accord to carnal union, and dwells unceasingly on the body of its object, suggests that it is not an expression of our rational nature at all but rather a force that invades us from the body. To the cynical, indeed, erotic love is no more than a story that we tell ourselves in order to dignify desire.

On the other hand, it is a story that we easily believe. It is within this context that we should read the great poems of courtly love—not as expressions of defunct codes of behavior or ideological illusions but as attempts to humanize the erotic by placing desire within the redeeming context of moral choice. These poems are reflections on a universal human problem: how do we integrate sexual desire into our moral lives while retaining our respect for others, and theirs for us? The elaborate rituals of courtesy raise the erotic into the sphere of rational choice; unless we do this, the medieval writers believed, our life on earth is jeopardized. Hence their fascination with the story of Tristan, whose desire broke through every conventional barrier, every courtesy, every demand of honor, reason, and morality, while remaining faithful, sacrificial, and (in a strange way) chaste. A like fascination animated Wagner's reworking of the legend, and his conception of erotic love is, like that of his medieval sources, a truthful attempt to display the human universal.

While the medievals wrote under the direct or indirect influence of the otherworldly Plato, however, Wagner's philosophical mentor was the acerbic and skeptical Schopenhauer. Wagner was an intemperate thinker, whose theories were thrown out from his prodigious sensibility like spray

from a ship in full sail. Schopenhauer by contrast was one of the great systematizers, who discerned a clear and uniform message in all that life afforded. Unlike Wagner, whose prose is hectic to the point of unintelligibility, Schopenhauer was a wonderfully lucid writer, the greatest stylist among German philosophers after Nietzsche, and perhaps the only example in modern times of a philosopher whose writings are as engaging to the common reader as they are indispensable to the expert. Despite these great differences, however, Wagner and Schopenhauer shared a common intellectual ancestry in the critical philosophy of Kant. Wagner had inherited the Kantian vision via Hegel and the Young Hegelians, principal among whom was Ludwig Feuerbach, whose philosophy of religion influenced the *Ring* cycle. Schopenhauer inherited Kant's thought directly, scorning the humbug, as he saw it, of Hegelian idealism, and representing Kant as the last great thinker before himself.

Among German intellectuals of Wagner's generation, Kantianism had replaced Christianity as the background system of belief. It was permissible to ignore Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel, as Schopenhauer did, but not to ignore Kant. The Kantian language shaped the intellectual agenda, and there was hardly a poet or a musician, hardly a novelist or a theologian, who did not see the main problem of metaphysics as that of the Kantian "thing-in-itself." When it came to morality or politics, even the most radical intellectuals thought in terms of "transcendental freedom," "the autonomy of the Will," and "the Kingdom of Ends." From Wagner's drama of the rape of the Rheingold to Marx's theory of alienated labor, from Schelling's cultural history to Schleiermacher's Biblical hermeneutics, from Hölderlin's poems of travel to E. T. A. Hoffmann's tales of fantasy, we encounter the same vision, striving to express itself in a myriad different ways—the Kantian philosophy of human nature. This philosophy rephrased the medieval problem of the relation between the rational chooser and the human animal in a modern idiom, and one compatible with the Enlightened skepticism of Kant's contemporaries and successors.

Kant had developed a metaphysical theory of human existence (a "philosophical anthropology," as he described it) which seemed to retain and endorse the view of the human being as the summit of creation, distinct from the other animals and uniquely endowed with selfhood, free-

dom, and will, while divesting that view of its religious connotations. According to Kant, human beings stand in a peculiar metaphysical predicament—one not shared by any other entity in the natural world. We see ourselves, he argued, in two contrasting ways—both as objects, bound by natural laws; and as subjects, who can lay down laws for themselves. The human object is an organism like any other; the human subject is in some way "transcendental," observing the world from a point of view on its perimeter, pursuing not what is but what ought to be, and enjoying the privileged knowledge of its own mental states that Kant summarized in his theory of the "transcendental unity of apperception."[5] It is not religious belief that forces us to see ourselves in this dualistic way. The need to do so is presupposed in language, in self-consciousness, and in the "practical reason" that is the source of all human action and moral worth. Even if there were no God, that would not undermine the belief in human freedom or in the "transcendental" viewpoint from which that freedom stems.

Human life is therefore inherently paradoxical. We are organisms, bound by biological and physiological laws. But we are also persons, bound by no other law than the freely chosen imperative of morality. We know that this is true because reason tells us that it *must* be true, although we do not understand it, since understanding deals only with empirical objects and falls silent on the threshold of the transcendental. Nevertheless, all human distinctness and all human dignity reside in our transcendental freedom. To abuse that freedom is to degrade human nature; to respect it, in both self and other, is to enter the ideal "Kingdom of Ends" that is our abstract and mystical reward.

Kant hesitated throughout his philosophical writings between a positive and a negative interpretation of this dualistic vision. On the positive interpretation, a human being is really two distinct things—an empirical object and a nonempirical subject, the latter existing in another way and another dimension, so to speak, being the real, substantial self behind appearances. On the negative interpretation, a human being is one thing, known and approached in two separate ways—as object and as subject. There is no "real transcendental self" behind appearances. But there is, nevertheless, a way of treating people *as if* there were such a thing: ad-

dressing them as free beings governed by reason, with a point of view that uniquely identifies them and which is not revealed to empirical observation.

This negative interpretation does not imply that the transcendental subject is an illusion. The case can be likened to that of a face seen in a picture: the face is not an illusion, nor is it part of the material world in the way that the pigments in which it is seen are part of the material world. It is there *for us,* and belongs to the interpretation that we as rational beings place upon empirical reality. This interpretation is not "subjective": we are not free to see things as we will but are constrained by our rational, imaginative, and perceptual capacities. Anyone who failed to see a woman's face in the *Mona Lisa* would be in some way defective. Of course, one person may see more in a picture than another, and there is in every case of "aspect perception" a measure of rational choice, exemplified in its most extreme form in puzzle pictures of the duck-rabbit kind. But this means merely that we can reason about the right way and the wrong way to perceive pictures, and that there may in some cases be more than one right way: it does not imply that aspects are either subjective impressions or collective hallucinations.[6]

The same is true of human freedom, selfhood, subjectivity, and personality: all these terms point to a way of seeing our fellow human beings, which both distinguishes them from the rest of nature and creates the basis for those moral, legal, and political relations in which our freedom is exercised and fulfilled. We see each other as engaged in a common dialogue, each characterized by his own indescribable ("transcendental") perspective and each responding freely to the free acts and words of others. And it is reason itself that leads us to see each other in this way. If we could not do so, then we could not reason either with others or with ourselves about what to do, what to think, or what to feel. We would be as blind to the human world as the person who could see only lines, shapes, and colors would be blind to the world of pictures. And being blind to the human world, we would also cease to belong to it.

Almost all of Kant's important followers—Reinhold, Beck, Fichte, Schelling, Hegel, and Schopenhauer—represented themselves as being the true (as opposed to the phony) expositors of his system, for which

they used either the name bestowed on it by Kant—transcendental idealism—or some name with a similar resonance, such as the "objective idealism" of Hegel. For most of them the self-conscious subject is the premise of transcendental idealism, and the relation between appearance and the thing-in-itself its principal problem. However, the Young Hegelians who influenced Wagner in his Dresden years departed in a crucial respect from the Kantian tradition. They (that is to say, their leaders, Bruno Bauer and Feuerbach) defined themselves not as idealists but as materialists. While recognizing the self-conscious subject as the premise and the focus of their philosophy, and while accepting the outlines of the Kantian moral system, they believed that human beings are natural objects in the empirical world and that the problems of the "thing-in-itself" and the "transcendental subject" are merely illusory.

This opposition between idealism and materialism was immensely influential, and Wagner too came for a while under its spell. But it is also based on a radical misunderstanding of the Kantian enterprise. Kant did not deny the reality of the material world. Transcendental idealism, he insisted, is also an empirical realism. Nor did Kant believe that human beings are in some way apart from the natural order. On the contrary, the problematic character of human existence arose, for Kant, because we are natural beings bound by the same physical laws as govern the rest of the universe. We are material objects with a subjective viewpoint—free beings who can also be objectively explained.

The leftward shift of the Young Hegelians culminated when one of their number, Karl Marx, wrote the *Communist Manifesto* (coauthored with Engels), attacking the dreams of the idealists in language that transferred those dreams and illusions to the material world. Wagner had, for a moment, shared those dreams before seeing that they were destined for disaster. This was one factor that prepared the composer for Schopenhauer, who regarded the materialist metaphysics of the Left Hegelians as merely pigheaded and their political utopia as the sign of an "unscrupulous optimism."

Wagner encountered Schopenhauer at a time when he had given up all hope (a hope in any case more theatrical than political) of establishing the Kantian Kingdom of Ends on earth. The Left Hegelians had rejected the

religious idea of redemption, in favor of redemptive politics—politics designed to release humanity from its "mind-forg'd manacles," as Blake had described them. Wagner sought redemption of another kind—neither the glorious salvation promised by the Christian Church nor the socialist utopia of Feuerbach and Marx, but an inner redemption achieved by the human subject alone, drawing precisely on the metaphysical isolation that distinguishes him from the natural order and which condemns him to a suffering that no other creature can know. Schopenhauer was an atheist whose sympathy for Hinduism and Buddhism nevertheless opened his thinking to religious ideas, leading him to graft onto the Kantian idealist metaphysics the very concepts with which Wagner's secular, solitary, and subjective redemption could be described. In addition, Schopenhauer was a pessimist whose acerbic wit made pessimism both consoling and, in a strange way, enjoyable. Not surprisingly, therefore, Wagner was captivated by the philosopher, whose system he saw as quite simply the fundamental truth about the world.

Schopenhauer's metaphysical theory is summarized in the title of his major work: *The World as Will and Representation* (1818, expanded 1844). Transcendental idealism, he asserts, is the only possible philosophy, following Kant's conclusive demolition of the alternatives. According to Schopenhauer it implies that the empirical world exists, for the subject, only as representation: "every *object,* whatever its origin, is, as *object,* already conditioned by the subject, and thus is essentially only the subject's *representation.*" A representation *(Vorstellung)* is a subjective state that has been "ordered" according to concepts of space, time, and causality, which are the primary forms of sensibility and understanding. The search for the thing-in-itself behind the representation is futile so long as we turn our thoughts to the natural world. Every argument and every experience lead only to the same final point: the system of representations, standing like a veil between the subject and the ultimate reality. No scientific investigation can penetrate the veil; and yet it *is* only a veil, Schopenhauer affirms, a tissue of illusions that we can, if we choose, penetrate by another means. He lavishly praises the Hindu writers of the Upanishads for perceiving this.

The way to penetrate the veil was stumbled upon by Kant, although

he did not see the significance of his own arguments. In self-knowledge I am confronted precisely with that which cannot be known as appearance, since it is the source of all appearance: the transcendental subject. To know this subject as object is precisely not to know it, but instead to confront once again the veil of representation. But I can know it as *subject,* through the immediate and nonconceptual awareness that I have of the will. All this leads Schopenhauer to the following conclusion:

> On the path of *objective knowledge,* thus starting from the *representation,* we shall never get beyond the representation, i.e., the phenomenon. We shall therefore remain at the outside of things; we shall never be able to penetrate into their inner nature, investigate what they are in themselves. . . . So far I agree with Kant. But now, as the counterpoise to this truth, I have stressed that other truth that we are not merely the *knowing subject,* but that *we ourselves* are also among those entities we require to know, that *we ourselves are the thing-in-itself.* Consequently, a way *from within* stands open to us to that real inner nature of things to which we cannot penetrate *from without.* It is, so to speak, a subterranean passage, a secret alliance, which, as if by treachery, places us all at once in the fortress that could not be taken from outside.

The thing-in-itself is will, and my immediate and nonconceptual awareness of myself is awareness of will. This much is revealed to me by the view "from within." However, I can know the will concretely only as phenomenon. All my knowledge, including knowledge of the inner life, is subject to the form of time. Nevertheless (Schopenhauer does not really explain how) the true nature of will as thing-in-itself is revealed to me. I know that will is one and immutable, embodied in the transient will to live of individual creatures, but in itself boundless and eternal.

The obvious question raised by such a philosophy is that of the individual: what makes me the particular individual that I am? Schopenhauer's answer is framed in terms taken from Leibniz. I am distinguished from other individuals by a *principium individuationis*—a principle of individuation—which is that of spatio-temporal continuity. It is only in space and time that individuals are distinguishable, and only when understood in

terms of their causal properties (their way of maintaining themselves in being and interacting with the surrounding world). Space, time, and causality form a web across the formless sea of being, and individuals are its knots. The thing-in-itself, which has neither spatial nor temporal nor causal character, is therefore without a principle of identity. In no sense am I *identical* with the will that I know from within. Will is *manifest* in me, trapped, as it were, into a condition of individual existence by its restless desire to embody itself in the world of representation. The will in itself, however, is timeless and imperishable. It is the universal substratum from which every individual arises into the world of appearance, only to sink again after a brief and futile struggle for existence.

Will manifests itself among phenomena in two ways: as individual and as Idea (a term that Schopenhauer uses in conscious deference to Plato). An Idea is a permanent objectification of the will, through which the will makes itself intelligible as a universal pattern. It is only in kinds and species that the Idea is presented to us, and in the natural world, therefore, the species is favored over the individual, since the species gives permanent form to the will. The individual is simply the species' way of perpetuating itself, not as individual but as Idea. Schopenhauer expresses the point in one of his many beautiful images:

> Just as the spraying drops of the roaring waterfall change with lightning rapidity, while the rainbow which they sustain remains immovably at rest, quite untouched by that restless change, so every Idea, i.e., every *species* of living beings remains entirely untouched by the constant changes of its individuals. But it is the *Idea* or the species in which the will-to-live is really rooted and manifests itself; therefore the will is really concerned only in the continuation of the species.

From this premise Schopenhauer derives a masterly portrait of nature's indifference to the individual, in terms that anticipate modern evolutionary biology. When the will becomes incarnate as an individual, he implies, it is as though it had opened a door into a place of torment. Nothing awaits the individual in this life save striving without reward, suffering without purpose, and conflict without resolution. Individual existence is,

from the individual point of view, a mistake, yet one into which the will to live is constantly tempted by its need to show itself as Idea. The will *falls* into individuality and exists for a while trapped in the world of representation, sundered from the calm ocean of eternity that is its home. Its life as an individual (my life) is really an expiation for original sin, which is "the crime of existence itself."

Although the intellect is in most things the slave of will, helplessly commenting on processes that it cannot control, it has one gift in its power: the gift of renunciation. The intellect can overcome the will's resistance to death by showing that we have nothing to fear from death and everything to gain. Death cannot extinguish the will, and though what survives death is not the individual but the universal, this should not worry us, since it was the mistake of existing as an individual that caused all our suffering in the first place.

Schopenhauer emphasized the connection between his philosophy and the Vedic Upanishads, which he knew from the Latin *Oupnek'hat* of Anquetil-Duperron, itself translated from the Persian rendering of Sultan Dârâh Shukoh.[7] The Upanishads, he declared, had been the solace of his life and would be the solace of his death. And indeed, under one interpretation at least, the Vedic philosophy offers the same consolation as Schopenhauer, describing the individual soul as wandering in the phenomenal world severed from its eternal home. The Upanishads use the Sanskrit word *âtman,* meaning (among other things) breath, to denote the soul and also the world spirit that is expressed in it. Max Müller translates the term as "self," since *âtman* is known in the act of inner reflection, when the self meditates on the world and aspires toward Nirvana. Salvation comes to the soul with the loss of its individuality and its escape from the phenomenal world into Brahma—into the *"Welt-Atems wehendem All,"* as Isolde describes it.

It goes without saying that *Tristan und Isolde* contains many echoes both of the Vedic philosophy and of Schopenhauer's rather less vaporous theory of will and representation. What stands before and impedes our salvation, Schopenhauer asserts, is the *principium individuationis*—the active and energetic attachment of the will to the phenomenal world, in which individuals endlessly strive to affirm their separate existence. Re-

demption comes through self-denial—when we see through the *principium individuationis* to the serene and oceanic world of the thing-in-itself. This realization, Schopenhauer writes, "produces perfect sanctification and salvation, the phenomena of which are the state of resignation, . . . the unshakeable peace accompanying this, and the highest joy and delight in death."[8] Even though there is no room in Schopenhauer's philosophy for the Christian God, he makes room for Christ as the example set before us of a pure renunciation, a self-overcoming that does not provide our redemption but which nevertheless points the way to it.

Vestiges of this philosophy are certainly discernible in Wagner's drama. The realm of Night, so movingly evoked by Tristan in the opening of act 3, corresponds to Schopenhauer's idea of death: a loss of individuality, a melting away into the ongoing stream that is the will behind appearances.[9] And the realm of Day, symbolized by the torch that Isolde extinguishes in act 2, corresponds to Schopenhauer's idea of representation. The realm of Day is a realm of individuals, sustained in being by the continuous illusion of the senses. Tristan and Isolde hunger to be united in the *Urvergessen:* the original darkness from which all things emerge and to which all things return.

To that extent, the philosophy of Schopenhauer can be taken as a theological commentary on *Tristan und Isolde*. But it is no more than that, and maybe rather less than that. For it is surely obvious that there is something missing from Schopenhauer's story, and that this missing element is what Wagner's music drama is about—namely, erotic love. Schopenhauer's conception of death, his negative view of the empirical world, and his theory of the individual are all challenged by erotic love, the meaning of which encompasses life and its continuation. Furthermore erotic love is essentially individualizing: its intentional object is the irreplaceable incarnate subjectivity of the other, as he is in himself, irreducible to his attributes or to any characteristic that he might share. Such indeed is the meaning of the Look shared by Tristan and Isolde, which sets the whole drama in motion. What is valued in erotic love is precisely the other person as an individual, and not the impersonal will behind appearances, which is equally manifest in us all. Erotic love is a defiance of death and death's dominion, both in its function as the progenitor of fu-

ture generations and in its intentionality as the celebration and endorsement of the individual subject, when that subject becomes object of another subject's love.

That is why erotic love has so often been viewed as aspiring toward, and resolved in, chastity. Through chastity the lover maintains his beloved's status in his feelings as a unique individual, the sole recipient and object of his passion, raised above the generalizing transactions of the body. This thought is fundamental to the legends of chivalry and courtly love. The love that focuses entirely on the individual, and on the soul incarnate in the veil of flesh, also has a tendency to transcend the flesh insofar as it leaves behind everything that is universal, replaceable, transferable, or consumable. The medievals had their own way of expressing the connection between erotic love and chastity; but the connection was not made only in medieval Europe. A remarkable example occurs in the moving puppet play *Love Suicides at Sonezaki,* written in 1703 by the Japanese writer Chikamatsu. The heroine of this play is a prostitute whose only love, being focused on the individual for whom she is predestined, enters her life as a transfiguring chastity. When the two lovers throw themselves from the cliff at Sonezaki, it is as though they are entirely purified by the gesture. The effect is of a supremely faithful attachment, unpolluted by the world and its carnal transactions.

Wagner intended something like this, and—modern cynicism notwithstanding—it is surely evident that the yearning expressed in his music is precisely not a form of concupiscence but rather the yearning of a love that wants to exalt, preserve, and immortalize the moment of reciprocal attachment. As I remarked in chapter 3, it is a tenable view that Isolde, in Wagner's version, dies a virgin—King Marke tells us, in his long monologue at the end of act 2, that he had never dared to approach her, and the two lovers themselves are depicted always in an ecstasy beyond the pleasures of the flesh. For what it is worth, Wagner even identified the transfigured Isolde (in conversation) with the Virgin of Titian's *Assumption.*[10] Nor does this way of looking at things make the relation between Tristan and Isolde any less carnal, any less a matter of need, than it is in Gottfried von Strassburg's overtly randy version. On the contrary, as with the relation between Cathy and Heathcliff in *Wuthering Heights,* noncon-

summation becomes the symbol of an absolute and nonnegotiable tie, a bond that no day-to-day transaction could possibly make or break.

Schopenhauer was aware that his metaphysics made no clear space for the erotic, and therefore appended a remarkable chapter to the second volume of *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung* devoted to the subject of sex and love—probably the first serious philosophical treatise on this theme since Plato. In this chapter Schopenhauer recognizes that erotic love is directed to the individual, and indeed that it has a peculiar "individualizing" force of its own: "individualisation, and with it the intensity of being in love, can reach so high a degree that without their satisfaction all the good things of the world and even life itself lose their value."[11] And he tries to reconcile this fact with his view that it is the species, not the individual, that is exerting itself in sexual love. Desire individualizes its object in order to enhance its own force and so to increase the chances of accomplishing its true but hidden design, which is not my design or yours but that of the will itself. Hence the existence of erotic love is compatible after all with the Schopenhauerian theory of the individual: even this intensest of bonds between individuals is founded in a metaphysical illusion. The desire of lovers for each other is not their doing, nor does it issue from the individual self. It is a stratagem pursued by the will, and the will is interested only in the species.

Schopenhauer's theory of the erotic is an attempt to explain the intentionality of sexual desire in terms of its function in the life of the species, and thereby to reduce a mental act which focuses on an individual to a generalizing need.[12] The attempt prefigures the similar "reductionist" explanations of contemporary sociobiology and fails—as all such reductionist explanations fail—by removing the very thing that is essential, which is the particularity of the object of desire. Moreover, were we to accept the theory, it would make a nonsense of *Tristan und Isolde*. Wagner certainly was influenced by Schopenhauer's conception of death, of the individual's inherent tendency toward death, and of the final consolation contained in that melting away into the primeval stream. But he did not believe that the force of erotic love lies elsewhere than in the individual subject, or that it was directed toward anything but the individual object. On the contrary, subject and object both become a reality in love, and

it is everything else—the world of day that keeps appearing at the window of this inner region—that is illusory. Hence the care with which Wagner removes from his lovers—in this work preeminently, but also elsewhere—the domestic trappings, the irritations and hardships, the erosions and distractions, the house, home, and children, which are the normal result and concomitant of love. Hence the long metaphysical brooding on names and on the mysterious word "and" that forever joins them. Although Tristan and Isolde are joined in death, they are joined as individuals, and their irreplaceable meaning for each other is precisely what propels them to their doom. Hence, finally, the letter that Wagner began to Schopenhauer, but which he neither sent nor completed, in which he argues that it is "our predisposition to sexual love" which "represents a way to salvation leading to self-knowledge and self-denial of the will."[13]

That quotation shows what Wagner had in mind when he borrowed so much Schopenhauerian and Vedic imagery for the dialogue of *Tristan und Isolde*. He wanted to identify what is *special* about erotic love, what sets it apart from the rest of our experience and makes it both tragic and consoling. The Vedic vision of human destiny, like Schopenhauer's philosophy of the will, attributes no special meaning to the erotic. In such comprehensive visions the erotic appears as just one of the many desires that besiege us in the phenomenal world, to be overcome like the others by a process of renunciation. The goal of that process is to die—but to die unattached, so as to leave the phenomenal world and enter the realm of Brahma. In Wagner's drama the goal is certainly to die—but to die *attached,* to become forever inseparable from the individual object of love by plunging together with that object into the oceanic darkness. The redemptive meaning of this action lies not in the release that it offers to the individual lovers but in the sacrifice through which they consummate their love. That is why we are so moved by Wagner's drama: we are brought by it into the presence of the sacred.

To understand that thought, however, we must return to the problem of erotic love, as the medievals pondered it. Classical religion distinguished erotic love from other kinds of love by postulating a divine origin for it. It is Aphrodite and her son Eros who afflict us with erotic passion, and this explains why that passion is so sudden, strong, and inescapable,

and why it works on us like destiny. Other loves—for parents and children, for friends, relatives, and neighbors—are natural rather than supernatural, and human rather than divine, in their meaning. They grow from our circumstances and do not single us out, as we are singled out by the arrows of Eros.

Medieval writers did not suppose that erotic love was divinely inspired; on the contrary, they accepted the New Testament ideal of a love brought down to us from God, a love that comes to us as a duty, which provides the test of virtue here on earth, and which therefore must be separated from every form of sensual longing. But precisely because their worldview was founded in the cult of *agape,* they recognized *eros* as a problem to be solved. And the evident solution was to refashion erotic love on the model of the love we owe to God. Like that other and higher love, erotic love is a destiny, both a joy and a burden, and it points beyond the world to a realm of grace. It is surrounded with sacred rites and customs; it imposes a rule of chastity and fidelity; and it transforms the lover into a quasi-supernatural being capable of virtuous deeds and noble sacrifices beyond the reach of common mortals. The medieval author of *The Pearl* finds this divine inspiration in paternal love for his dead daughter—and he beautifully persuades us that this is possible. But the spiritualization of the father-daughter love in *The Pearl* is plausible only because the daughter is dead, transformed into the angel who brings consolation to her grieving father. That unusual instance apart, it is invariably erotic love, rather than the other loves of human society, that has been remade by the poets as a Godward-tending exaltation of the soul. This is true preeminently of the medieval tradition from which Wagner drew his inspiration. But it is true also of oriental traditions, notably that of the Sufi mystics typified by Hafiz—another of Wagner's enthusiasms—whose odes, written in the form of the *ghazâl* or amorous lyric, seem to be addressed to an earthly beloved but are in fact addressed to God.[14]

That Christian and Muslim writers should think of erotic love in this way ought, however, to surprise us. Alone among human loves, the erotic can take the form of sin; and the sin of loving in unholy union is compounded by the carnal nature of desire, which imbues erotic love with the character of a bodily temptation. Parental love, sibling love, and friend-

ship are not forms of temptation: if they involve sin it is because they may lead you into sin, as when a doting mother shields her criminal son from justice. In themselves, however, these day-to-day loves are always innocent and free of a carnal focus. As Gottfried was at such pains to point out, erotic love can be debased, made vicious and disgusting, by our way of treating it. Prostitution, obscenity, perversion, pedophilia—all these things display the inherently problematic nature of the sexual act and the need to safeguard its expression by distinguishing virtuous from vicious desire.[15]

So why pick on the erotic as an icon of the love that aspires to redemption and which is rewarded through grace? Medieval Christian and Muslim poets were not the first to travel this path, and some understanding of their motives can be gained from Plato, originator of the Neoplatonic cosmologies and erotologies that dominated both medieval and classical Arabic literature. In *The Symposium* Socrates expounds the famous Platonic theory of the soul's ascent, from the desire for carnal union with the beautiful object to the act of serene contemplation of the Form of the Beautiful. This purging away of the base trappings of carnal desire, so as to enjoy love not as a species of concupiscence but as a form of quasi-religious veneration, was for Plato the rational solution to an existential predicament. Sexual desire afflicts us as a kind of trouble—an overcoming of the soul by passions whose bodily origin sets them beyond the reach of our intellectual powers. We are compromised by desire but also, for that very reason, prompted to overcome its force. We do this by using the principal weapon that reason has provided: the shift of attention from the particular to the universal, and therefore from the time-bound and mortal to the timeless and eternal. The very thing that renders erotic love so dangerous—the carnal attachment that comes to us from a place outside our conscious thought—provides the opportunity for a quasi-religious transcendence into the unseen realm of the Forms.

Inspiring though that theory is, it is philosophically flawed. Plato holds that one and the same emotion can exist in two forms, both as a carnal desire and as a rational contemplation of the Forms. But this is surely incoherent. What makes love erotic is precisely the carnal desire for the human individual; and no emotion founded in desire for an individual can

be identical with another state of mind, in which the object is a universal and in which desire has been discarded. What Plato is describing is not the ascent of erotic love to a higher level, but rather the loss of erotic love and its replacement by something else—a bloodless philosophical passion that has nothing of the erotic about it at all, and which is not even directed toward a human being.

Despite this, to my mind insuperable, difficulty, Plato's image of spiritual ascent has never lost its fascination for poets, theologians, and philosophers, and it is important to understand why. The reason, it seems to me, is to be discovered not by examining erotic love but by turning to the phenomenon in which that love is grounded, and which Plato sought to overcome: sexual desire. Plato's account of love was premised on a particular view of sexual desire, one inherited by Avicenna, by Aquinas, by the poets of courtly love, and by Dante. In desire, he believed, we act and feel as animals. In erotic love, however, it is our nature as rational beings that is primarily engaged—a fact that was made particularly apparent to Plato by his own homosexuality, which seemed to divorce erotic love from animal reproduction and at the same time to deprive the sexual act of any higher rational purpose. In order to permit the full flowering of erotic love, therefore, Plato considered it necessary to discard the element of desire. The resulting purified love would be a rational state of mind, without any trace of the bodily pollution from which it originated.

This vision of the erotic—as bifurcated between rational love and animal desire, so that the peculiarly human aspect is only accidentally connected to the animal—is founded in a mistake. The intentional object of desire is redescribed in Plato's theory not as the person desired but as the act performed with him or her. The resulting mechanistic vision of sex has damaged discussions of this topic from Plato to the present day. In our time it has resurged in two forms: intellectual and practical. The intellectual form is epitomized in the pseudoscientific studies of sex that have dominated recent discussions of the erotic; the practical form is displayed in pornography and in the (more or less successful) attempt to change the focus of sexual desire from the individual object to the transferable commodity. Both these developments can be understood once we see human beings as Kant and Wagner saw them, namely as incarnate persons in

whom animal and self exist in an inextricable unity, each both exalted and compromised by the other.

Discussion of the modern, postromantic attitude to sex must inevitably begin with Freud, whose revelations, introduced as neutral, "scientific" truths about the human condition, were phrased in terms that are now more or less standard. According to Freud, the aim of sexual desire is "union of the genitals in the act known as copulation, which leads to a release of the sexual tension and a temporary extinction of the sexual instinct—a satisfaction analogous to the sating of hunger."[16] This scientistic image of sexual desire gave rise in due course to the Kinsey report and is now part of the standard merchandise of disenchantment. It seems to me that if it contains any truth, it is because it has been *accepted* as true and, in being accepted, changed the phenomenon that it set out to describe. Freud's theory is not a theory of human sexual desire in the social conditions which emerge spontaneously between rational beings. It is a description of sexual feelings transformed by a kind of scientistic prurience, and by an obsession with the human object that clouds awareness of the subject.

As soon as we look at things as artists and poets have described them, we can see how far the Freudian picture departs from what was previously known. Consider the phenomenon so bleakly described by Freud—sexual pleasure. This pleasure is unlike the pleasure of eating, in that its object is not consumed. It is unlike the pleasure of a hot bath, in that it involves taking pleasure in an activity and in the other person who joins you. It is unlike the pleasure of watching your child at play, since it involves bodily sensations and a surrender to physical impulses. Sexual pleasure resembles the pleasure of watching something, however, in a crucial respect: it has intentionality. It is not just a tingling sensation; it is a response to another person and to the act in which you are engaged with him or her. The other person may be imaginary: but it is toward a person that your thoughts are directed, and the pleasure depends on the thoughts.

Pleasure that depends on thought can be mistaken, and it ceases when the mistake is known. Although I would be a fool not to jump out of a soothing bath after being told that what I took for water was really acid,

this is not because I would have ceased to feel pleasurable sensations in my skin. The pleasure of the hot bath is "purely physical," without intentionality and detached from thought. Contrast the pleasure you take in seeing your child win the long jump at his school sports day: should you discover that, after all, it was not your child but another who resembles him, your pleasure would instantly cease.

Likewise, in the case of sexual pleasure, the discovery that it is an unwanted hand that touches you at once extinguishes your pleasure. The pleasure experienced until that point could not be taken as confirming the hitherto unacknowledged sexual virtues of some previously rejected applicant. Hence a woman who makes love to a man who has disguised himself as her husband is no less the victim of rape, and the discovery of her mistake will lead to instant revulsion. It is not simply that consent obtained by fraud is not consent; it is that the woman has been violated, in the very act that caused her pleasure, so that the pleasure itself was a kind of error. (Something of this sense of violation is captured in Benjamin Britten's opera *The Rape of Lucretia*. More interesting, from the philosophical point of view, is the case of Alcmene, visited by Jupiter in the form of her husband Amphitryon. Does Jupiter really succeed in enjoying Alcmene, is she really unfaithful to her husband, and has Amphitryon genuine grounds for jealousy? Plautus treats this situation as comic, Kleist as tragic, and Giraudoux as fraught with irony. But none of them solves the puzzle.)

Sexual pleasure is dependent on arousal, a condition distinct from, though displayed by, tumescence. Arousal is a "leaning toward" the other, a movement in the direction of the sexual act, which cannot be fully distinguished either from the thoughts on which it is founded or from the desire to which it leads. Arousal is a response to the thought of the other as a self-conscious agent, who is alert to me and who can have "designs" on me. This is evident from the caress and the glance of desire. A caress of affection is a gesture of reassurance—an attempt to place in the consciousness of the other an image of one's own warm concern for him or her. Not so, however, the caress of desire, which *outlines* the body of the recipient; it is an exploratory rather than a reassuring gesture. It aims to fill the surface of the other's body with a consciousness of your interest—

interest not only in the body but in the person *as* embodied. This consciousness is the focal point of pleasure in the one who inspires it. Sartre writes of the caress as "incarnating" the other:[17] as though, by your action, you bring the soul into the flesh (the subject into the object) and make it palpable.

The caress of desire is given and received with the same awareness as the glance is given and received. They each have an epistemic component (a component of anticipation and discovery). It is hardly surprising, therefore, that the face should have such supreme and overriding importance in sexual interest. From the scientistic perspective it is hard to explain why the face should have the power to determine whether we will or will not be drawn to seek pleasure in another part. But of course the face provides the picture of the other's subjectivity: it shines with the light of self, and it is as an embodied subject that the other is wanted. Perversion and obscenity involve the eclipse of the subject, as the body and its mechanism are placed in frontal view. In obscenity, flesh is represented in such a way as to become opaque to the self that inhabits it: that is why there is an obscenity of violence as well as an obscenity of sex, a torturing of the flesh that extinguishes the light of freedom and subjectivity.

A caress may be accepted or rejected: in either case because it has been "read" as conveying a message sent from you to me. I do not receive this message as an explicit act of meaning something, but as a process of mutual discovery, a growing to awareness in you which is also a coming to awareness in me. In the first impulse of arousal, therefore, begins that chain of reciprocity which is fundamental to interpersonal attitudes. She conceives her lover conceiving her conceiving him . . . not ad infinitum but to the point of mutual recognition, where the partners are fully identified in each other's eyes with their bodily presence.

Sexual arousal has, then, an intentionality that is not merely epistemic but also interpersonal. In its normal form it is a response to another individual, based in revelation and discovery, and involving a reciprocal and cooperative heightening of the common experience of embodiment. It is not directed beyond the other to the world at large; nor is it straightforwardly transferable to a rival object who might "do just as well." Of course, arousal may have its origin in highly generalized thoughts, which

flit libidinously from object to object. But when these thoughts have concentrated into the experience of arousal their generality tends to be put aside; it is then the other who counts, and his or her particular embodiment, as well as I myself and the sense of my bodily reality in the other's perspective. Hence arousal, in the normal case, seeks seclusion in a private place, where only the other is relevant to my attention. Indeed, arousal attempts to abolish what is not private—in particular to abolish the perspective of the onlooker, of the "third person" who is neither you nor I.[18]

This natural movement is further amplified and idealized in our thinking so as to give sense and meaning to the vision of a chaste and inviolable attachment, such as that described in the tale of Tristan and Isolde. This story, like the companion story of Troilus and Cressida, presents the sexual bond as sacramental in itself, whether or not endorsed by theological doctrine or consecrated by a religious rite. In the romantic fabrication known as the letters of Héloïse and Abelard, the abbess recalls the moments of intense lust she had enjoyed with her unfortunate lover, and—although he rebukes her for dwelling on them—they form a kind of metaphysical vindication of her love and a spiritual proof of marriage. This late medieval work belongs to the same tradition as the tales of Tristan and Troilus: like them, it is an attempt to come to terms with the inherent paradox of sexual desire—that it is both an attraction between objects and a dialogue of subjects—and to find in passion another and higher kind of action.

People express themselves through their intentional acts. But they *reveal* themselves in what is unintentional and beyond ready control. Hence the importance in sexual relations of those responses that cannot be willed but only predicted, but which are nevertheless peculiar to self-conscious beings. Blushing offers a singular instance. Although an involuntary matter, and—from the physiological point of view—a mere rushing of blood to the head, blushing is the expression of a complex thought, and one that places the self on view. My blush is an involuntary recognition of my accountability before you for what I am and what I feel.[19] It is an acknowledgment that I stand in the light of your perspective and that I cannot hide in my body. A blush is attractive because it serves to embody

the perspective of the other and at the same time to display that perspective as an involuntary response to *me*. Your blush is not merely caused by me but is in some way directed at me and establishes a relationship between us. The same is true of unguarded glances and smiles, through which the other subject rises to the surface of his body, so to speak, and makes himself visible. In smiling, blushing, laughing, and crying, it is precisely my loss of control over my body and its gain of control over me that create the immediate experience of an incarnate person. In such expressions the face does not function merely as a bodily part but as the whole person: the self is spread across its surface and there "made flesh." In blushes, smiles, and glances, in short, the body exalts and reveals the person, shows the subject in the object, and makes of that subject an object of desire—of the desire to be united with *this person,* which is also a desire to possess. All this is audible in the Prelude to *Tristan und Isolde,* and in the motive of the Look that provides its inexorable onward motion.

The concepts and categories that we use to describe the embodied person are far removed from the science of the human body. What place in such a science for smiles as opposed to grimaces, for blushes as opposed to flushes, for looks and glances as opposed to mere visual perception? In seeing your color as a blush, I am also seeing you as a responsible agent and situating you in the realm of embarrassment and self-knowledge. (Hence nonrational animals cannot blush—not even those animals, like pigs, with translucent skin.) If we try to describe sexual desire with the categories of human biology, we miss precisely the intentionality of sexual emotion, its directedness toward the embodied subject. Freud's description of desire is the description of something that we know but shun. An excitement that concentrates on the sexual organs, whether of man or of woman, that seeks to bypass the complex negotiation of the face, hands, voice, and posture, voids desire of its intentionality and replaces it with a pursuit of the sexual commodity, which can always be had for a price. We have become habituated to forms of sexual interest in which the person, the freedom, and the virtue of the other are all irrelevant to the goal. But we should see this not as a gain in freedom but as a loss of it, since it involves setting freedom aside as an irrelevant adjunct to the object of desire.

To someone agitated by his desire for Jane, it is ridiculous to say, "Take Henrietta, she will do just as well." Thus there arises the possibility of mistakes of identity. Jacob's desire for Rachel seemed to be satisfied by his night with Leah, only to the extent that, and for as long as, Jacob imagined it was Rachel with whom he was lying (Gen. 29:22–25; see also the wonderful realization of this little drama in Thomas Mann's *Joseph and His Brothers*). Our sexual emotions are founded on individualizing thoughts: it is *you* whom I want and not the type or pattern. This individualizing intentionality does not merely stem from the fact that it is persons (in other words, individuals) whom we desire. It stems from the fact that the other is desired as an embodied subject and not as a body.

You can see the point by drawing a contrast between desire and hunger (a contrast expressly negated by Freud). Suppose that people were the only edible things; and suppose that they felt no pain on being eaten and were reconstituted at once. How many formalities and apologies would now be required in the satisfaction of hunger! People would try to conceal their appetite and learn not to presume upon the consent of those whom they surveyed with famished glances. It would become a crime to partake of a meal without the meal's consent. Maybe marriage would be the best solution. Still, this predicament is nothing like the predicament in which we are placed by desire. It arises from the lack of anything impersonal to eat, but not from the nature of hunger. Hunger is directed toward the other only as object, and any similar object will serve just as well. It does not individualize the object or propose any other union than that required by need. Still less does it require of the object those intellectual, moral, and spiritual virtues that the lover might reasonably demand—and, according to the literature of courtly love, must demand—in the object of his desire. When sexual attentions take such a form, they become deeply insulting. And in every form they compromise not only the person who addresses them but also the person addressed. Precisely because desire proposes a relation between subjects, it forces both parties to account for themselves: it is an expression of my freedom, which seeks out the freedom in you.

Unwanted advances are therefore also forbidden by the one to whom they might be addressed, and any transgression is felt as a contamination.

That is why rape is so serious a crime: it is an invasion of the victim's freedom and a dragging of the subject into the world of things. If you describe desire in the scientistic terms used by Freud and his followers, the outrage and pollution of rape become impossible to explain. In fact, just about everything in human sexual behavior becomes impossible to explain—and it is only what might be called the "charm of disenchantment" that leads people to receive these descriptions as the truth.[20]

In sexual desire, in the form of that state of mind which was taken for granted by Wagner, the aim is union with the other, where "the other" denotes a particular person with a particular perspective on my actions. The reciprocity involved in this aim is achieved in a state of mutual arousal, and the interpersonal character of arousal determines the nature of the "union" that is sought. All desire is compromising, and the choice to express it or to yield to it is an existential choice, in which the self may be in danger. Not surprisingly, therefore, the sexual act is surrounded by prohibitions; it brings with it a weight of shame, guilt, and jealousy, as well as joy and happiness. It is inconceivable that a morality of pure permission should issue from the right conception of such a compromising force. Indeed the traditional Christian morality, in which monogamous union, enshrined in a vow rather than a contract, is the norm, shows far more sensitivity to what is at stake than the usual current alternatives.

But of course there are other codes that diverge from that norm, while at the same time striving to do justice to the existential reality of desire as a bond between incarnate subjects. One such, and in a way the most sublime yet recognized by the human race, is the code of courtly love, which enhances the distance between lovers to the point where each becomes a mystery to the other. This code arose alongside the Christian doctrine of marriage, but it is adapted more specifically to the situation dramatized by Wagner, in which faithful attachment is also in conflict with the just expectations of the world. It is a code that recognizes, accommodates, and attempts to alleviate the potentially cataclysmic force that erupts in the world of objects when two subjects strive to unite in it completely.

If it is so difficult now to see the point of such codes, it is in part because human sexual conduct has been demoralized in our thinking. In redescribing the human world in the neutral terms of sexology, we also

change it. What was an existential commitment between persons becomes a sensation in the private parts. The sexual sacrament gives way to a sexual market; and the result is, to borrow Marx's language, a fetishism of the sexual commodity: in other words, a fundamental displacement of interest from the individual to the generality of his or her sex. The idealization of the object of desire, which is the ruling principle of courtly love, shores up the belief in that object's irreplaceability, so that he or she can be desired as an individual—in other words, not as an object but as an embodied subject. This idealization is not merely a cultural form imposed on the universal substance of sexual interest. It is a prolongation and amplification of a movement that is contained within sexual interest itself—the movement that Wagner captures in the motive of the Look, when I meets I in the moment of fascination.

Gottfried was aware that sex might become a market commodity, and explicitly warned against the danger (lines 12304 et seq.). He therefore took pains to represent the bond of desire between his lovers as a simultaneous bond of eternal and unbreakable love. But of course desire is not the same thing as love, and each can exist without the other. The purpose of traditional sexual education, with its emphasis on chastity, purity, and pollution, was to ensure that the sexual impulse was fully integrated into the personality, so that desire would go hand in hand with respect and admiration and so form the basis of a lasting union.

Marx's thoughts in *Das Kapital* about the fetishism of commodities ultimately derive from the Kantian contrast between treating people as ends and treating them as means.[21] The same contrast animates Wagner's vision of love and desire in *Tristan* and also in the *Ring*. Indeed the Nibelung's ring epitomizes this contrast: it is the object obtained by foreswearing love, so putting the transactions of the market in the place of personal union. In the first act of *Die Walküre* Wagner shows two individuals in the grip of that anguished concern for each other which admits no substitutes, and in which the vocabulary of desire—glance, caress, kiss, silence—has taken on another and higher meaning. Siegmund and Sieglinde are face to face, and the music outlines them with supremely erotic tenderness. At this personal level the suffering of love is a premonition of bereavement, a recognition of the irreplaceability of another

life, in which the self and its glance have become the focus of commitment. And, it is implied, the suffering of love is also a vindication: a sign that the lovers have risen above the natural order and possessed themselves of the individuality and the freedom which justify the trouble of existence, and of which bereavement is the price.

There is a premonition of this higher state in *Das Rheingold*. Although the giants are initially attracted to Freia as a personification of sex in its natural form, one of them, Fasolt, is afflicted by her beauty. He cannot, in the end, relinquish her until she is hidden from view. The hair that shines above the piled-up hoard represents the incarnate object of love—that which is caressed by the lover for whom natural appetite has been transcended into personal tenderness. Freia's hair can be hidden only by the Tarnhelm, the thing that hides the individual behind an infinity of disguises. But Freia's glance—her *Blick*—remains, the direct expression of that individual self for which there are no substitutes and no disguises, and which is the focus of Fasolt's desire. Only one thing can take away the glance of Freia, namely the thing that was forged by renouncing love. Freia is therefore exchanged for the ring. Fasolt seizes the ring from Fafner with the cry: "Back, thief! The ring is mine—it is due to me for Freia's glance" *(Mir blieb er für Freias Blick)*.

This episode shows the meaning of the ring: it is the spell that undoes love by dissolving everything desired—even the object of love—in a stream of substitutes. Fasolt's premonition of suffering is verified immediately: he is murdered for the sake of this object without a use. This is not merely because the ring is *wanted* by Fafner: it is because it has already colonized the soul of Fafner, deceiving him into thinking that the only love known to him—brother love—can be exchanged for something better.

The crime against love is the admission of substitutes: for by this means we leave the world of value and enter the world of price. It is for this reason that societies have devoted such attention to the sexual mores of their young. Traditional sexual education may be summarized in anthropological language as an attempt to impart an "ethic of pollution and taboo." Children were taught to regard their bodies as subject to pollution by misperception or misuse. The sense of pollution is by no means a trivial side effect of the "bad sexual encounter": it may involve a penetrating

disgust at oneself, one's body, and one's existential condition, such as is experienced by the victim of rape. Those sentiments express the tension contained within our experience of embodiment. At any moment we can become "mere body," the self driven from its incarnation and its habitation sacked.

The most important root idea of sexual morality is that I am in my body not as a "ghost in the machine" but as an incarnate person. I do not stand to my body in an instrumental relation: subject and object are merely two aspects of a single thing, and sexual purity is the guarantor of this. Sexual virtue does not forbid desire: rather, it makes true desire possible by reconstituting the physical urge as an interpersonal feeling. Children who learn "dirty habits" detach their sexuality from themselves, setting it outside themselves as a curious feature of the world of objects; their fascinated enslavement to the body is also a withering of desire, a scattering of erotic energy, and a loss of union with the other. Sexual virtue sustains the subject of desire, making him present as a self in the very act that overcomes him.

Life in the actual world is difficult and embarrassing. Most of all is it difficult and embarrassing in our confrontation with other people who, by their very existence as subjects, rearrange things in defiance of our will. It requires a great force, such as the force of erotic love, to overcome the self-protection that shields us from intimate encounters. It is tempting to take refuge in substitutes that neither embarrass us nor resist the impulse of our spontaneous cravings. The habit easily grows of creating a compliant fantasy world of desire, in which unreal objects become the focus of real emotions and the emotions themselves are withdrawn from personal relations, thus impoverishing our social experience. In this process the imagined other, since he or she is entirely the instrument of my will, becomes an object for me, one among many substitutes defined purely in terms of a sexual use. The sexual world of the fantasist is a world without subjects, in which others appear as objects only. And when a person is targeted by a desire nurtured on fantasy—when a real subject is treated as a fantasy object—the result is a sin against love. This is the sin of lust or concupiscence, which Gottfried attributes to King Mark.

All these thoughts have great bearing on the vision of the erotic im-

plied in Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde.* The situation of Wagner's lovers isolates them from society and its norms; theirs is a love that can lead to no domestic happiness, no child-rearing, no peaceful and fulfilled old age. It is a love without a future and at the same time a love that cannot be renounced, since self and self are linked by it, each seeing himself as consubstantial with the other. Viewed from the perspective of normal society, it is a futile love and also a subversive love—a trap into which the lovers have fallen and into which they drag all those who are close to them. However, Wagner's drama represents the love between Tristan and Isolde as not futile at all, but on the contrary the supreme vindication of their existence. And Wagner finds this vindication precisely in those features of their love that are rooted in sexual desire. It is the irresistible bodily presence of Tristan that has reduced Isolde to her condition of abject shame and life rejection in act 1. She shows her grandeur not by renouncing this futile passion but by refusing to renounce it—and by a dawning recognition that to renounce it would be to die, so deeply is it entwined with all that she is and wants. In the shadow of that recognition comes another: that to die would be right in any case, provided he too died with her. For then he would show her that for him, as for her, the love that united them was supremely important—more important than death, and urging death as its proof.

Looks and caresses of desire are not just playful exchanges of gestures—although they are partly that. At the extreme point, the point to which they tend as their metaphysical *telos,* they are an attempt to appropriate the other's body, to make that body your own—in short, they are an attempt at possession. Wanting Tristan as incarnate, Isolde also wants to know him as he knows himself: it is almost as though she seeks to be *embodied* in him, to have the same first-person awareness of his incarnation as he has himself.[22] Idealization of the object follows from this, not inevitably, but as a natural attempt at self-protection: You must be thoroughly, transcendentally, worthy of my desire. This strange and compromising thing that I want from you—to be in your body, and you in mine—must be the highest of goals, the one to which I can commit myself completely and in which I can trust you to commit yourself too. Anything less than that jeopardizes my freedom.

Such idealization is totally distinct from sexual fantasy. Fantasy substitutes object for object on the stage of desire; idealization does not substitute, nor does it focus on the object. It imagines and embellishes the incarnate subject and focuses its energy on *him*.

All that is clearly shown in the first scene of Wagner's drama. It is evident that the shame, humiliation, and anger of Isolde are rooted in sexual desire. No other emotion could have the effect that we witness; and it is an effect that shows Isolde to be not merely desiring, but desiring to the extreme point where the object has become idealized. Tristan has become the body into which she wishes to plunge herself, as one might plunge a torch into a lake in order to extinguish it. Already, in this idealization, she is tending to the thought of death. Hence when, at the beginning of scene 2, Tristan is revealed standing at the helm and Isolde stares at him from afar, the words *"Mir erkoren, / mir verloren, / hehr und heil, / kühn und feig"* are set to motive 2 in an ascending sequence, with motive 1 yearning after it over diminished and half-diminished harmonies until the chromatic sequence, having encompassed the complete octave from D, ascends one semitone further on to E-flat, only to encounter catastrophe in the form of the unrelated chord of A-flat major. The vocal line crashes down a whole octave to the E-flat below, falls again to C, and then rights itself unsteadily on A, with an A-major triad restoring the lost tonality—all this to the words *"Todgeweihtes Haupt"* ("death-devoted head"). The emergence of motive 13 from motives 1 and 2 is shown as both inevitable and catastrophic. Isolde's appalled, subconscious recognition of a fateful desire brings with it the thought of death—and death dealt to both parties (ex. 5.1).

Schopenhauer would explain the emotion conveyed by example 5.1 in the following way. Isolde idealizes Tristan in order to believe that he might sacrifice himself for her; thereby she prepares to sacrifice *herself* for *him*. But she is mistaken in identifying Tristan as the object of this sacrifice, and her mistake arises from the deep illusion of the *principium individuationis*. Isolde's desire belongs to the world of representation; it leads her to interpret the forces that hold sway in her as though they issued from and focused upon individuals in space and time. In fact, however, the sacrifice for which she prepares is not the one that she imagines but another, of

Mir er - ko - ren, mir ver - lo - ren, hehr und

pp *p* *poco cresc.*

heil, kühn und feig! Tod - ge-

cresc. *f* *ff*

weih - tes Haupt! Tod - ge - weih - tes Herz!

p *p* *p* *pp*

Example 5.1

which not Tristan but the species is the beneficiary. The will is preparing *her* as a sacrifice, for the sake of the children that she and Tristan might produce. Death is certainly in her thoughts; but only because the will is preparing her extinction at the behest of the unborn generations that will eventually require it. All this drama of romantic love is simply a ruse whereby the will accomplishes its impersonal purpose. The shame that compels fidelity, the look that inspires commitment, the furtive glances that single out their object and endow it with its nimbus of irreplaceabil-

ity—all these issue from the imperative of the species, which requires nothing more of us and nothing less than sacrifice. Erotic love is an apprenticeship for the absolute commitment that will weather every storm and provide shelter for children—until the point where the children too become prey to those furtive glances and fall victim in turn to the conspiracy against the living that the unborn have planted in our midst.

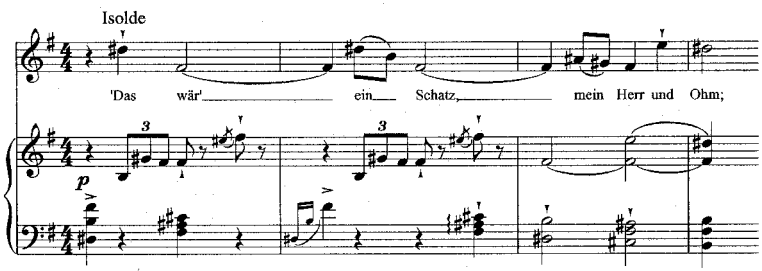
Contemporary sociobiologists express similar ideas less metaphysically. But they do not remove the fatal weakness in Schopenhauer's theory, which is that it confuses necessary and sufficient conditions. The individualizing intentionality of sexual desire as Isolde experiences it is sufficient to induce the commitment that is needed for reproduction. But it is not necessary. The proof of this lies before us in the lower animals, both birds and mammals, who make the sacrifices involved in reproduction without the free giving of the self that for us is called falling in love, with no knowledge of shame, humiliation, or sexual compromise, with nothing that corresponds to the look of desire or the blush that answers it. Those phenomena signal a specific intentionality in human desire, and it is one that lies outside the repertoire of other species, since it is predicated on a concept they do not possess—the concept of the self as the free originator of an individual's actions and the center of his world. Schopenhauer's account of sexuality therefore falls short of the very phenomenon that Wagner set out to dramatize.

To put the point in another way: human sexual desire in its normal form is an existential predicament that can be reduced to the reproductive urge only by misdescribing its intentionality. It is this intentionality that interests Wagner, since it shows that the urge to sacrifice arises from our very existence as free subjects, incarnated in the world of objects and therefore trapped by that world's demands. In desiring Tristan, Isolde finds herself *challenged in her freedom*—such would be a Kantian way of putting it. She is being called upon to respond as one person to another by a force that also overwhelms her. She seeks to remake as a choice what begins as a bodily compulsion. She is in that predicament for which Platonic ascent, renunciation, courtly love, and marriage have all been proposed as solutions. But should Tristan not reciprocate her feeling, she cannot release it as a free offering of herself; it then becomes a poison, a

demand of her empirical nature that invades and contaminates the source of her freedom, which is the self. It becomes, in other words, a self-destruction, a translation from subject to object. Isolde's sense of this is conveyed by the contaminated harmonies that accompany the Look motive in the measures that follow those quoted in example 5.1.

Hence Isolde refers in anger and disgust to the external view of her body—the view of her as an object of merchandise, being taken as booty to King Marke. She caricatures Tristan's thoughts in claiming her for his uncle with the following words: *"Das wär' ein Schatz, mein Herr und Ohm; wie dünckt Euch die zur Eh'? Die schmucke Irin hol' ich her"* ("That would be a prize, my lord uncle; what do you think of her as a bride? I'll go fetch the pretty Irish girl").[23] The music here, with its sarcastic appoggiaturas, making a kind of folk melody out of an empty B-major triad, tells of a fickle, transferable, insulting transaction, the stuff of bawdy stories and popular songs (ex. 5.2). In other words it encapsulates the perspective on Isolde that is above everything loathsome to her—the view of her as sexual object, when her overwhelming and unconfessed desire is to be a sexual subject, freely giving to the other who freely gives in turn.

In the opening scenes of act 1, therefore, Wagner vividly puts before us the moral quandary of sexual desire. It is precisely in desire and my submission to it—a submission later symbolized by the drink of love—that I am most conscious of my personal existence as a free self with rights, demands, and a purely human destiny. That destiny is not the "empirical" destiny of parenthood—something that I share with the animals—but the "transcendental" destiny of self-sacrifice, where what is sacri-



Example 5.2

ficed is precisely that—the self. This is, for me, the ultimate proof of my freedom, that I can make an offering of myself to another. This is the offering that Isolde longs to make and which Tristan, through his grievous attachment to the empirical world (as she sees it), has prevented her from making. Here too, I shall argue, lies the origin of those feelings that are summarized for us in concepts of the sacred and the consecrated. The goal that I glimpse in desire is not of this world; no merely empirical transaction could possibly fulfill it, since it would merely rearrange our bodies and not produce the substantial unity that I crave. Hence the courtly ideal of chastity: lovers faithfully joined, desirous of each other and feeding on each other's looks and caresses but never consummating their desire, so that it persists as an endless unsatisfied yearning, come as near as possible to their metaphysical goal, which is a union in the transcendental with no correlate in the world of fact.

It is in desire, too, that we have our firmest intuition of what is really meant by Kant's second formulation of the categorical imperative, which tells us to treat humanity always as an end in itself and never as a means only.[24] Kant uses the term "humanity" deliberately, to comprehend human beings in both their transcendental and their empirical aspects—as both freely choosing subjects and causally determined objects. At the beginning of act 1 we discover Isolde wrestling with the awareness that the man consecrated in her desires is nevertheless treating her as a mere means and at the same time forcing upon her the loathsome vision of herself as object. Her anger at Tristan is thus also a longing to regain possession of herself, to be once again a free subject in her own eyes and in his. But he alone can enable her to do this by reciprocating her desire and so permitting the moment of sacrifice, in which she makes a gift of herself and invites the same gift in return.

This returns us to the great question that troubled Plato, Avicenna, and the poets of courtly love—what has desire to do with love and love with desire? In a celebrated study C. S. Lewis carefully distinguishes the various loves of humankind and draws an interesting contrast between erotic love and friendship.[25] "Lovers," he writes, "are normally face to face, absorbed in each other; friends, side by side, absorbed in some common interest." This suggestive observation finds confirmation in Wag-

ner's drama, in which the side-by-sideness of Isolde and Brangäne, and of Tristan and Kurwenal, are contrasted with the face-to-faceness of the lovers, not merely in act 2 but in all that has preceded it. (It is because the lovers are already face to face in act 1 that Tristan is avoiding Isolde's glance.) Josef Pieper makes a similar point, remarking that lovers talk to each other incessantly about their love whereas friends never mention it.[26] And again Wagner illustrates the point, making it central to act 2, in which the mutual interrogation of lovers, normally so dull to an outsider, is shown in all its poignant inwardness. This is why Brangäne and Kurwenal are so important to the drama as Wagner conceives it, and not merely (in Brangäne's case) because of the conventional need for a confidante: their loyalty and devotion, belonging to the sphere of friendship, place an isolating frame around Tristan and Isolde's love. Friendship, Wagner shows, means comfort, help, and security; erotic love means distress, anxiety, and danger. Whereas your friend wants your good, your lover wants *you;* and if he cannot have you, then his love may turn to hate.

Erotic love is therefore not a form of companionship or mutual support, although it may lead in time to those goods. In its initial and defining impulse it is a desire for reciprocal possession, a desire to possess the other by being oneself possessed by him. As such, erotic love envisages no worldly benefits or gains beyond itself. It is therefore irreducible either to charity *(agape)* or to friendship, and the poets of courtly love were deceiving themselves when they represented erotic love as, in Chaucer's words, a "choice all free." We may choose to give way to this love or to conceal it; but what we give way to or conceal is not itself a choice.

For the same reason, erotic love cannot be construed as a kind of amalgam of love (conceived either as *agape* or as *philia,* friendship) and sexual desire. Nor can the element of desire be "refined away," leaving the love itself unaltered. Erotic love is an exaltation of desire itself to the point of complete attachment. Its aim is to possess, to hold, to exclude; and its object is neither the body of the beloved nor the soul. It is the embodied person: the free being bound by flesh.

The distinction between erotic love and friendship is worth dwelling upon, since it casts light on one of Wagner's aims in *Tristan und Isolde,* and also in the *Ring,* which is to tie erotic love to sacrifice, and sacrifice to

redemption—in other words to recast the Christian message with *eros* in *agape*'s stead. Here, briefly, is how we might state the distinction, drawing on the Kantian conceptions expounded in this chapter:[27]

Erotic love begins from desire and bears the traces of it ever after. Hence erotic love focuses on the embodiment of its object: not on the *body* (since that would involve the perversion of desire), but on the other *as embodied*. The other is present in his flesh; in sexual desire he also *presents* himself and makes of himself a *present*.

Love, like desire, feasts on looks: for it is through the look that this "presenting" of the self is most immediately accomplished (one reason why beauty has so much to do with it). But looks are neither necessary (blind people too can desire) nor sufficient. Desire is expressed in arousal and seeks to arouse its object through touching, fondling, and caressing. In arousal the body occupies the foreground; yet it also becomes transparent, exposing the other person as object and subject of desire. Hence desire is dangerous, compromising, the source of existential anxiety. Only in certain circumstances is desire advisable, and only rarely is its expression safe. Institutions exist in order to protect us from the abuse of sexual feeling. There are laws circumscribing the erotic, but none limiting friendship.

A lover may also be a friend, but he is not a friend by virtue of being a lover. On the contrary: love is jealous and at war with every rival—even the rival of whom the friend would approve. Hence those chilling words of Blake:

> Love seeketh only self to please,
> To bind another to its delight;
> Joys in another's loss of ease
> And builds a Hell in Heaven's despite.

The lover is focused on the beloved; but he does not really accept the otherness of the beloved—does not accept that the other's life is a life apart and does not place the other's interests above his own interest in being first in the other's affections.

In friendship there is a recognition and acceptance of the otherness of the friend. Friendship involves loyalty not to a cause or a common con-

cern but to an *individual.* This loyalty involves both closeness and distance. The friend seeks the other's company but also seeks the other's completeness as an individual and therefore his full autonomy as another, with a life of his own.

Hence friendship tends to be mutual. Although friendship does not seek a return, it dies if the return is never offered. The reward of friendship is friendship, but it is granted only if it is not sought. At the same time, the one who persistently offers friendship to a person who never returns it is not acting as a friend. In such a case, there is another motive at work—love, for example, like the love of a parent toward an ungrateful child, or desire. The concept of unrequited erotic love causes us no difficulty; the concept of unrequited friendship is less easily understood. We recognize in such an idea no motive to which a rational being might easily succumb.

While friendship may be full of feeling, it is not an emotion. Friendly feelings are no more the essence of friendship than respectful feelings are the essence of respect. Friendship is a complex relation between persons, in which each takes the other into consideration. Love, by contrast, is an emotion, which may exist even without the relation for which it yearns. Hence there is no Platonic ascent, no "overcoming" of friendship, as there is an overcoming of love. Nor do you bask in your friendship as you do in your love—those writers who try to present friendship as a feeling (Montaigne, for instance, in his immensely misleading account of his attitude to La Boëtie[28]) seem always to be writing of something else: a sublimated erotic love, perhaps, or a passionate attachment such as that between parent and child.

Friendship, unlike love, is not exclusive. A person may have several friends, all equally dear, and all accepting the fact with equanimity and even pleasure. Why erotic love should be otherwise is one of the great mysteries of our condition—for after all, both love and friendship are focused on the individual; both involve a kind of surrender of the self; and the most important difference—the presence or absence of desire—seems hardly to prepare us for so momentous a divide.

Friendship is nevertheless like erotic love in certain respects. For example, it occurs only between rational beings. (Animals are companions but never friends, just as they are mates but never lovers.) Friendship

involves dialogue and togetherness—although it may stop short of intimacy (whereas erotic love stops short of intimacy only when thwarted or renounced). Both erotic love and friendship are directed toward the individual and regard him as irreplaceable. There is no other who would "do just as well," and to propose a substitute for the object of love or friendship is to mistake the motive of both lover and friend. Love and friendship are both "everlasting"—they die, but they are never "satisfied," since they have no goal beyond themselves. (The contrast with contractual relations should here be borne in mind: a contract has terms and ends when those terms are fulfilled.) Finally, both love and friendship are offered and received as *gifts* and can be offered and received in no other way. (Hence there is no contract in which friendship or love is the subject matter.) Moreover, they are expressed through gifts and are manifestations of grace.

Friendship is therefore a form of generosity. Although not exclusive, it cannot be universalized any more than the habit of giving can be universalized. (The person who gives to everyone is the person who has nothing to give.) Friendship must therefore be distinguished from *agape* (the "love to which we are commanded," as Kant described it). *Agape* is a duty and not a gift (even though giving is sometimes a duty—for instance when our neighbor, through no fault of his own, finds himself destitute). We owe this neighborly love to those with whom we could never stand side-by-side and also—for the Christian—to those who hate us and to those whose company we abhor.

The friend commands my special attention: I make an effort on his behalf, and his friendship becomes part of my life, something intrinsically valuable to me. The intrinsic value of the "neighbor" belongs to him as a rational individual. He is valuable for his own sake but not necessarily for me. The value of the friend is a value for *me;* one of my possessions, and one that has no price. Friendship elevates those who are bound by it; it lifts them above the plateau of *agape* into an illuminated region that is *theirs* and which they have no duty to share.

In friendship, as I have said, we recognize the otherness of the other: we do not regard ourselves as bound to him by any fateful tie, such as that which joins parent to child or lover to lover. This recognition of his oth-

erness means that I am also his judge: I must strive to forgive his faults but not to ignore them. I am always in a *chosen* relation with my friend, even when the grounds of choice are hidden from me. I grieve at his moral downfall, but I also condemn it; and if he provokes my moral disapproval, my friendship may be finally withdrawn.

The relation between friendship and virtue is intricate and hard to describe: neither Aristotle nor Kant made proper sense of it.[29] Yet it exists and is one reason why friendship is so important to us. The person with genuine friends (as opposed to the person, like Falstaff, who has only "boon companions," associates in business or partners in crime), is one whom we trust. We have a prior guarantee of his moral worth, since he will be no stranger to virtue. If we find it difficult to believe that there are still people with *genuine* friends, it is because this implies that there really is virtue in the world.

Nobody qualifies for trust merely by having lovers. Erotic love notoriously bypasses moral judgment, fixing itself on the most bizarre or tawdry objects and dragging down its victim, as Des Grieux is dragged down by Manon or Swann by Odette. At the same time, erotic love idealizes its object, striving to vindicate its vast investment by believing that the cause is worthwhile. Even in erotic love, therefore, we are dominated by the *image* of virtue: of a human being who is special, precious, and worthy of our exclusive care.

The medieval Tristan epics set out to show an erotic love that could not be extinguished or subdued by the conventions of society. The love of Tristan and Isolde is subversive precisely because it is neither friendship nor *agape* but *eros,* and hence exclusive, possessive, and expressed through desire. The emerging view of marriage as a divinely ordained sacrament can be seen as an attempt to Christianize the erotic: to accommodate *eros* within institutions whose rationale is *agape*. Marriage removes erotic love from the public world, confines it within the private sphere, and bends it to the task of reproduction. It ceases then to be subversive and instead adds its force to the common task of upholding the social order. But the Christian marriage owes its character as an exclusive and faithful attachment to the love that it captures. The sacramental character of marriage is not conferred by convention. It is conferred by erotic love, which con-

tains *within itself* the moment of sanctification, the moment in which two people make gifts of themselves and receive that gift in turn.

Hence a marriage without *eros* defies the sacramental purpose of the institution. Marriage needs erotic love for its validity, and to impose marriage on someone whose love has already been bestowed elsewhere is to commit a sin. This, at least, is one reading of the Christian doctrine and of Christ's own words on the topic in the Gospels. It is indeed the reading adopted by Wagner in the posthumous sketches for his drama *Jesus of Nazareth*.[30]

Conversely, the Christian will argue, erotic love without marriage is incomplete, focused on the present moment but never fulfilled by it. Falling in love is a kind of hallucination, a desire to possess what cannot in fact be possessed, since it belongs essentially to another—the selfhood of the beloved. The solution to this crisis is either renunciation—which is an occupation for the saint—or marriage, in which the union is endorsed by others and made obedient to the demands of society. In this light marriage is not a defiance of erotic love but rather its climax and fulfillment—the way forward from the initial crisis into a new kind of social harmony.[31] To put it another way: the sacramental character of marriage derives from the sacred moment in desire, but this sacred moment finds its natural fulfillment only when transcended into the normality of marriage. The Christian ideal, in which erotic love and marriage entirely coincide, is celebrated by Wagner both in *Jesus of Nazareth* and in *Die Meistersinger,* in which Hans Sachs explicitly points to the contrast between conjugal love and the subversive love of Tristan and Isolde, while renouncing both for the sake of Eva's happiness.

In *Tristan und Isolde* Wagner wished to isolate the sacred moment, to show us that it is indeed sacred, and to reawaken in us the knowledge that the erotic is fundamental to the human condition, an aspect of our freedom, and an avenue to redemption. The structure of his drama is dictated by this goal: the lovers are cut off from marriage, and already, at the outset of the drama, it is too late for renunciation. All they can do is confront the sacred moment, to acknowledge that their love must find its goal and its vindication here and now or not at all. And in confronting the moment, they prepare themselves for death.

I hope that what I have set forth in this chapter helps us to see that the Kantian approach to the phenomena of desire and love captures what they really are for us. I also hope to have shown that the Kantian conception is implicit in Wagner's music drama and provides the true philosophical underpinning to the action. But we have been led to what is perhaps the most puzzling feature of the drama and of the erotic as Wagner presents it: the feature of sacrifice. Why should this be wanted by the lovers, what is achieved by it, and how appropriate is it to invoke the religious idea that sacrifice is the price of redemption? These are questions that no one, to my knowledge, has convincingly answered.

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Tragedy and Sacrifice

In *The Art-Work of the Future* (1849) Wagner identified tragedy as the high point of Hellenic art, describing it as a religious art form, and the tragic festival as a celebration of the common destiny and fellowship of a race or tribe.[1] He saw the Greek theater very much as he was beginning to see his own experiments in music drama: as an attempt to perpetuate the inner experience of religion by transferring it to the aesthetic sphere:

> Tragedy was the religious rite become a work of Art, by side of which the traditional observance of the genuine religious temple-rite was necessarily docked of so much of its inwardness and truth that it became indeed a mere conventional and soulless ceremony, whereas its kernel lived on in the Art-work.[2]

In *The Birth of Tragedy,* written in 1872, thirteen years after *Tristan und Isolde,* Nietzsche emphasized the irrational side of Greek culture, identifying it with the god Dionysus, at whose festival the tragedies were performed. Since then the connection between tragedy and religion, and between both and the irrational, has been frequently revisited by classical scholars. One of their aims has been that adopted by Nietzsche: to repudiate the eighteenth-century view of Hellenic culture, variously espoused by Winckelmann, Goethe, and Schiller, as an expression of the higher, nobler, and more rational side of man.[3] Nevertheless, we should acknowledge Wagner as one of the early inspirers of the new understanding of Greek tragedy and recognize the extent to which his own dramas were influenced by it, both in form and in content. And it is through reflecting on

tragedy that we can best approach the mystery of *Tristan und Isolde,* a drama which proceeds toward death through every kind of mental, physical, and spiritual suffering, and which is yet one of the most consoling works of art to have been produced in modern times.

A remark in Aristotle's *Poetics* informs us that the tragedies originated as satyr plays, and the derivation of *"tragoidia"* from *"tragou ode"*—i.e., "goat song"—is already assumed by Horace (*De Arte Poetica,* 220). Commentators influenced by Nietzsche and the "armchair anthropologists" have therefore persistently envisaged an "original" tragedy, centered on an act of sacrifice, in which the participants, dressed in goat costume, represent the feral following of Dionysus, and the plot invokes the death of the old year and the birth of the new. This conjecture, popularized by Jane Harrison and Gilbert Murray, has, like almost every other concerning the origins of tragedy, been questioned by modern scholars. The proverbial saying of the Greeks that the drama festival had "nothing to do with Dionysus" encourages a certain skepticism toward the ritual hypothesis, as well as toward Wagner's view of tragedy as an artistic crystallization of religious sentiment in which the actor takes the role of priest.[4] Superficially at least, this skepticism is borne out by Aristotle, who emphasizes character and plot, and who explains the mysterious pleasure we obtain from tragedy as proceeding from the arousal and purging *(katharsis)* of pity and fear. Aristotle's explanation is phrased in quasi-medical terms and seems to regard the religious context as merely one element in the human drama.[5] And there are modern scholars who believe that the "savage Dionysus" idea is an academic construct, derived from a poetic construct set before us by Euripides in *The Bacchae.*[6]

On the other hand the gods do not merely take part in the tragedies; they overtly tie the knots in which the protagonists are bound. The vast burden of fate with which the tragic heroes are afflicted, the prayers and rituals, the insoluble dilemmas and unavoidable laws—all these bespeak a divine interest in what is happening, and the liturgical character of the presentation suggests the idea of a sacred ritual. The tragedies frequently end with a formal lamentation, dirge, or ritual burial, in which a communal sense of restored moral order is invoked by the chorus.[7] The *Agamemnon* of Aeschylus tells the story of successive murders within a

single household. One of these—the murder of Iphigenia by Agamemnon—was a ritual sacrifice to Artemis, and the others are described in terms appropriate to ritual sacrifice. The great scene in which Cassandra shrieks her prophecies outside the palace where Agamemnon is about to be killed is fraught with implicit and explicit parallels between the murder of the king and the sacrifices to Apollo that were once Cassandra's duty as priestess. As she exchanges her strophes with the bewildered chorus, Cassandra too approaches the state of sacrificial victim. Going to her death in the palace, she offers herself at last to Apollo, whom she had once to her cost refused. To many commentators, the language, settings, and formalities of the tragedy are far better understood as attenuated rituals than as straightforward dramas in which character and plot are the primary foci of interest.[8] The example of the *Oresteia* seems to confirm their view.

Dionysus is the god that dies: he is Dionysus Zagreus, the great hunter who is also hunted, to be torn to pieces by his worshippers and then to reappear intact. In Euripides' *The Bacchae* we catch a glimpse of a horrible ritual that this god may or may not once have demanded. And in its ritual and religious significance, the cult of Dionysus paralleled the cults of Attis and Adonis and foreshadowed that of Christ.[9] Although not all these things were known or pondered in Wagner's day, enough had been brought to light to awaken the deep sympathy of an artist whose mission was to resurrect the sacred through drama.

Why do we watch tragedies? What pleasure do we receive from the spectacle of catastrophe and suffering? Aristotle speaks of a "peculiar pleasure" *(oikeia hedone)* that attaches to the spectacle of tragedy. But his account of the matter suggests that tragedies are not so much enjoyable as beneficial. It does you good to be purged of pity and fear: you feel better afterward, purer, more able to live, perhaps, with your own misfortunes. Modern thinkers emphasize less the purging than the arousing of emotion. For A. D. Nuttall, for example, tragedy gives pleasure because it is a "game of death," in which emotions that normally distress us are enjoyed—enjoyed not only because they are divorced from real threat but because they are endowed with a kind of closure.[10] That account, which echoes remarks made by David Hume in his essay on the topic, makes the

tragic experience enjoyable simply as one among many possible forms of aesthetic pleasure. We take pleasure in terrifying scenes, so long as they are fictions and so long as there is the element of dramatic control that rounds them off, so to speak, in our emotions. This is a peculiar fact about us, for which there may very well be no further explanation.

Yet we demand an explanation, and Aristotle's is of little help. For how can the imaginary objects presented in the theater purge us of the real pity and fear that afflict us in our lives outside?[11] In pondering such questions we begin to feel the force of the religious analogy. A religious ceremony does not present us with a fiction, nor does it take place in the space and time of our daily lives. That which occurs at the altar is dislocated from the space of our ordinary emotions, in something like the way that the theatrical stage is dislocated from the auditorium. At the same time, the event at the altar has a transfiguring effect on us. We are absorbed into the ritual and cleansed of our isolation. This process is one of reconciliation: we are reattached to the community and enjoy the forgiveness and acceptance of the god. And the process must be repeated, since membership and forgiveness exist only when renewed. The ritual does not deliver knowledge, as a sacred text might deliver knowledge. It delivers the mystery itself—union with the godhead and, along with this, the purging of isolation in the rite of the tribe. Such is the liturgical experience as we know it from the Greek and Roman mysteries and from the Christian Eucharist. If the tragic theater were in some way a recreation of this sacramental moment, then we should have the beginning of an explanation of our interest in tragedies.

But this raises the original question in a yet more acute form. Why are death and destruction needed to produce this consoling effect? This is not a question about tragedy only; it concerns religion too. Throughout the centuries religious rituals have been death-directed, focused on acts of sacrifice, sometimes rationalized as burnt offerings to the gods, but often involving deification of the victim himself. The victim is usually an animal, but not always. He may also be a human being—either self-sacrificed like those who throw themselves before the juggernaut, or killed on the altar as in the sun-worshipping rituals of the Aztecs.

The Christian religion shows no real departure from this norm. The

Gospels tell the wondrous story of Christ's passion, in which the Lamb of God becomes the victim of the community that he has been sent to save. By virtue of this death the community is transported to another and higher realm: the Kingdom of Heaven, which is not of this world. Hence the victim is not merely sacrificed: he is also sacred. Indeed he reveals through his sacrifice that he is God Himself, incarnate in human form. Christians commemorate this story in the Eucharist. But the story is also a rationalization of the Eucharist, a way of unfolding the mystery without disenchanting it. Hence the ritual is not a representation of Christ's passion, but a reenactment of it. The bread and the wine are transubstantiated into Christ's body and blood, and the dying God is a "real presence" at the altar.

The ritual of communion occupies the central place in the original Christian religion—the religion in its springtime Mediterranean flowering. Christians rehearse Christ's passion, through the ceremonial consumption of his flesh and blood. By this ceremony the worshippers are purified, so as to reenter the transcendental community of the saved. Rituals must be repeated exactly, otherwise they lose their power—which is a power to incorporate, to repossess each member in the community's name, which is also the name of God. Hence the Eucharist must be celebrated again and again, if the community is to be maintained in a state of redemption.

That is the situation dramatized by Wagner in *Parsifal,* and it is one on which we can take two familiar and contrasting views. Seeing the mystery of Christ's passion and its endless reenactment with the eye of faith, we accept it as the unique road to salvation, the greatest promise that God has offered us. We are drawn into the community of believers, and we hope like them for salvation through the purifying ritual of the Mass. Observing the mystery with the eye of science, however, we are more likely to be struck by its similarity to other practices than by its claim to uniqueness. We recall the cults of Dionysus, Attis, and Osiris, deities symbolically torn to pieces by their followers and miraculously restored to them. We notice the resemblance between the eucharistic drama and Greek tragedy, itself part of the ancient festival of Dionysus. We associate the Lamb of God who is sacrificed on humanity's behalf with the scapegoat of Leviticus, who carries the sins of the community into the wilderness,

there to purge them through a miserable death. We recall the cults of the "hanged god" studied by Frazer and the armchair anthropologists.[12] And we shall quickly furnish ourselves with a general theory explaining the sacrificial offering, who becomes sacred in the moment of sacrifice, and whose flesh must be broken and consumed.

One such general theory—and one of the most influential—is that of René Girard, who, in a work devoted to the sacred in general and to tragedy as a particular instance of it, has argued that the sacred originates in violence and that the paradigm form of religious violence is the collective murder of a victim.[13] Girard explains the consolation obtained from this murder in the following way. In the absence of a judicial system, Girard argues, societies are invaded by "mimetic desire," as rivals struggle to match each other's social and material acquisitions, so heightening antagonism and precipitating the cycle of revenge. The solution is to identify a victim, one marked by fate as "outside" the community and therefore not entitled to vengeance against it, who can be the target of the accumulated blood lust and who can bring the chain of retribution to an end. Scapegoating is society's way of recreating "difference" and so restoring itself. By uniting against the scapegoat people are released from their rivalries and reconciled.

The need for sacrificial scapegoating is therefore deeply implanted in the human psyche, arising from the very attempt to form a durable community in which the moral life can be successfully pursued. One purpose of the theater is to provide fictional substitutes for the original crime and so to obtain the benefit of moral renewal without the horrific cost. Hence, according to Girard, we should see a tragedy like Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus* as a retelling of what was originally a ritual sacrifice, in which the victim is chosen so as to focus and confine the need for violence. The victim is thus both sacrificed and sacred, the source of the city's plagues and their cure. Girard rescues what he regards as the only valid part of Freud's notorious theory of the original parricide, as expounded in *Totem and Taboo*. Yes, Girard argues, collective murder is fundamental to religious communities, but not murder of a father; rather, murder of the victim, who may be himself accused of murdering the father but whose death is required to satisfy the general need for aggression.

Proximate to Girard's theory is that of Walter Burkert, whose *Homo Necans* offers "an anthropology of Ancient Greek sacrificial ritual and myth."[14] Burkert and Girard agree on the crucial idea that myth is not prior to ritual but, on the contrary, a commentary upon ritual and an attempt to whitewash the killing that, in their view, is its essential component. However, they differ over a crucial matter, which is the role of animals in ritual sacrifice. Their difference in this respect goes to the heart of what each thinks religion to be. For Girard the animal sacrificed at the altar is a *substitute* for the human victim. Such a substitute victim can be freely sacrificed without fear of the defilement or *miasma* that attaches to murder. (The semantic value of this substitution is reflected, for example, in the myth of Iphigenia or in the Old Testament story of Abraham and Isaac.) For Burkert the sacrificial animal is the *original* victim, and the ritual is a ceremonial reenactment of the original sin of the hunter-gatherer and a bid to propitiate the victim by consecrating the species.[15] The sacrificial ritual is a survival of an emotional need planted in the earliest days of human evolution.

Such theories strike a chord, for they make a theoretical connection between things that are already connected in our feelings while at the same time reducing the number of our problems. Tragedy presents us with a puzzle; so too does religious violence; so too do the concepts of the sacred and the sacrificed. Girard wins our sympathy by deftly reducing these three puzzles to a single one and then arguing that it is not a puzzle at all, but instead a natural expression of a primary social need. However, the status of the theory is unclear: Is it intended as a causal explanation—if so, of what exactly? Is it an exercise in *Verstehen,* an attempt to unravel the meaning of human institutions without necessarily penetrating to their cause? Is it, like the theories of Frazer and Jessie Weston, a compendium of likenesses, a demonstration that human thoughts and practices are everywhere analogous and to be understood by spelling the analogies out?

As recent commentators have pointed out, ritual sacrifice occurred in many different contexts and served many different functions. The assumption that it answered to a single collective need, and a need, moreover, for collective violence, is therefore not obviously suggested by the

facts.[16] Moreover, although there are religions focused on acts of violence, there are religions from which violence is entirely banished as the primary form of sacrilege. Buddhism is replete with sacred acts, objects, places, and words: yet no trail leads from these sacred things to the original sacrifice that engendered them. Nor can we construct a general account of Greek tragedy on the model suggested by Girard. Tragedies were as various in ancient Greece as they were in Elizabethan England, and many of them did not involve the death of the central character (*Oedipus Tyrannus* being an obvious instance). Clearly, then, the Girardian theory falls short of the kind of generality required by a causal explanation.

This does not mean that we should reject the theory, but that we should cease to treat it as an explanation. Girard and Burkert argue as critics argue, pointing to analogies, redescribing, emphasizing, and evaluating so as to discern in their subject matter the kind of inner coherence that we look for in a work of art. Their theories are only misunderstood when framed in the language of sociological science; they should be treated rather as pieces of cultural criticism, on a par with the vision of myth and its meaning that we discover in the writings and dramas of Wagner. Even if we remain skeptical of the thesis that tragedy originates in ritual sacrifice, therefore, the parallel may still be of great significance in revealing to us what tragedies mean. And we can, by this route, suggest an answer to the puzzle posed by tragedy.

Thus we can see the dichotomy between chorus and tragic hero as replicating that between the crowd and its victim, and also that between the congregation and the holy sacrifice. This is made explicit in Euripides' *The Bacchae,* but the parallels can also be discerned in Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus* and in the *Oresteia,* where Orestes becomes a victim as he first fulfills and in that very act excites the chorus's need for sacrifice. Moreover, the *Oresteia* is a dramatization of the very process that Girard's theory invokes: the cycle of vengeance, brought to an end not by ritual sacrifice but by the Goddess of the City, who implants the rule of law in place of the debt of revenge, and retribution by the state in place of the penalties exacted by society. Aeschylus, in effect, is showing another solution, another way out of the vicious circle, and one that no longer requires a victim.

Nor should we neglect the abundant references to hunting in the tragedies. Pierre Vidal-Naquet has analyzed the way in which hunting and sacrifice form two complementary and superimposed strands throughout the *Oresteia* of Aeschylus,[17] who explicitly uses the technical terminology of hunting, as well as omens of hunting animals, in order to describe the vengeance that storms through the house of Atreus. The tragic victims are often described in sacrificial terms or even, like Iphigenia, sacrificed directly on the altar of a god. The pursuit of Orestes by the Furies parallels the pursuit of the quarry by a pack of hounds, and the peculiar "singling out" that is essential to the successful prosecution of a hunt.[18]

All these facts alert us to potent archetypes that can be discerned in the structure, the themes, and the emotional force of Greek tragedy. The action is not a ritual sacrifice; but it lies adjacent to the spiritual territory where ritual sacrifice belongs, evoking primeval feelings of guilt, threat, and collective vengeance, and also the transition from sacrificial victim to sacred presence which is the common gift of so many religions. Whether or not ritual sacrifice has its origins in hunting, it parallels hunting in pitting a community against a victim, with whom, however, the community identifies on the "eternal" level—the level of sanctity and sacrifice.

The existence of these archetypal feelings would also suggest an answer to the problem of tragedy. If it is possible to live through an act of ritual sacrifice in imagination, while nevertheless experiencing the moment of transition as the burden of human guilt is collected by a single individual and then discharged through some awe-inspiring downfall, then we can obtain the benefits of sacrifice without the costs. The victim would be purely imaginary but the sacred moment all the more intense. The tragic audience would benefit from the spectacle in something like the way that the religious congregation benefits: by a movement of reconciliation that lifts the burden of anxiety and restores the community to itself.

That is only a sketch, but it is surely far more plausible an account of why we go to tragic performances than the explanation which tells us that we "enjoy" them. We enjoy comedies, but we do not enjoy tragedies. We are inspired, elevated, consoled by them—but that is not what we normally mean by enjoyment. The desire to repeat the experience stems not

from the pursuit of pleasure, but from a deeper need for restoration, of a kind that we know also from religious ritual.

In his book on the scapegoat, René Girard makes the striking claim that the gospel narrative, and the communion ritual that it explains, contain a radical reversal of the old religious experience.[19] In the gospels, the victim achieves transcendence and divinity through an acceptance of his fate, through an attitude of serene detachment from the aggressors, and through a manifest awareness that, while the aggressors do not know what they are doing, he does. For the first time the aggression that is at the root of the sacrificial rite is understood and forgiven by the victim, who is able both to accept being sacrificed and to believe in his own innocence.

The Greek tragic hero may also accept his fate, as Oedipus does, but only when he has first been compelled by the weight of evidence or the burden of misfortune to acknowledge that he deserves it. In short, the Greek tragic hero is compelled to agree with his persecutors. His fault may take many forms: a deformity, incest, parricide, and also kingship, wealth, grandeur. In the last analysis, however, the appurtenances of kingship (of which incest is one) are, in Girard's view, merely preparations for the victim's role—ways in which the sacrificial offering reveals his status as an outsider.[20] The Christian martyr, by contrast, remains aloof from his tormentors, forgiving them, and therefore outcast from them, even in the moment of death—the moment when the community makes a bid to reclaim him. This Christian reversal gives birth to an altogether new experience of the sacred. Although Girard does not explicitly say so, the new experience of the sacred lies at the heart of the Christian idea of redemption. And it is the experience that Wagner is constantly working toward, not only in *Parsifal* but also in *Tristan* and the *Ring*. The Christian victim sacrifices himself *for the sake of* his tormentors, is lifted thereby above the tawdry world in which his death occurs, and is deified.

This brings us to a question that is pertinent not merely to the understanding of Wagner, but to the entire history of Christian art—the question of whether there can be a Christian tragedy, in the sense of a tragedy that tells the story of Christian sacrifice. Does not the self-offering of the victim, the conscious adoption of the redeemer's role, and the serene for-

giveness that precedes the sacrificial act and also overcomes it, remove us from the world of tragedy into another and altogether calmer spiritual landscape? The nearest art has come to a Christian tragedy is arguably Bach's *St. Matthew Passion,* in which the wonderful C-minor chorus that concludes the work is a kind of ritual dance, a lullaby of acceptance that recalls the ritual burials of ancient tragedy. But the *Passion* tells only half of the story, and the glorious resurrection that is to come is integral both to the myths and the ritual of Christian worship. To render the Christian idea of redemption in artistic form is automatically to move beyond the arena in which tragedies are played out, into a place where death loses its finality. This is the enchanted landscape of *Parsifal,* and it is part of Wagner's genius to have perceived that the Christian idea of redemption looks beyond tragedy to a celestial acceptance of suffering as the precondition of renewal. According to Cosima, Wagner viewed *Tristan* as "the greatest of tragedies."[21] But the avoidance of tragedy informs all the great Wagnerian dramas, including *Tristan,* and this fact is of a piece with the act of Christian renunciation that compels the Wagnerian plot.

Nevertheless, there are important similarities between the Wagnerian theater of renunciation and the Greek theater of tragic defeat—similarities that partly explain why Wagner's dramas shine with the same sacred aura. As in so many of the Greek tragedies, hunting forms an important background to the Wagnerian plots and is often associated with the sacrificial moment. Parsifal is led to Montsalvat by the swan that he is hunting, and which he kills. The Christian reversal begins at once, as Gurnemanz reproaches Parsifal for his action. As a result of Gurnemanz's teaching, Parsifal sees the death of his quarry as undeserved and himself as a persecutor, in need of the redemption that can come only from the conscious forgiveness of the victim. Somewhere in the deep memory of the human race that victim still lives, having once died for our salvation.

Isolde is brought to Cornwall as booty, and we first see her snarling like a caged animal, surrounded by the mocking, hostile stares of the hunters who are bringing her home. As she and Tristan later fit themselves for retribution a hunt takes place in the background; and unconsciously they know that it is they who are being hunted, to be revealed as victims when the hunt bursts in.

Most significant of all is the role of hunting in the *Ring,* in which it is portrayed from the outset as the background condition of the human order, with Siegmund driven as quarry into Hunding's house, there to meet the sister who had been orphaned by hunters and later to flee with her into the forest to be hunted as a pair. (The close of act 2 of *Die Walküre,* with Sieglinde's nightmare of being hunted, set against the approach of Hunding's hounds, is surely without compare as a vision of hunting from the quarry's perspective.) The Valkyries are hunter-gatherers of human flesh, and the great culmination of the cycle occurs when Siegfried, hunting with his new companions, recounts the story of his life and so becomes the quarry. This miraculous scene achieves something that is perhaps not achieved elsewhere in art, which is the recovery of the victim's innocence at the very moment when he offers himself for sacrifice—so that he offers himself, so to speak, *through* his innocence, thereby undermining the aggression. In *Oper und Drama* Wagner compared the role of the orchestra to that of the chorus in the Greek tragedy. Although this imperfectly describes his own use of the orchestra in subsequent works, it perfectly fits the technique that the composer uses to set a frame around Siegfried as he is led forward to the slaughter. The orchestra is the supremely sympathetic observer of its own sacrificial victim, following his narrative in a kind of subdued awe, leading him on as the Greeks gently led the sacred bull to the altar, encouraging him to give the sign of acceptance that will summon the sacrificial blow.

The connection between Siegfried's death and the stories of victims sacrificed and sanctified so that the world might be renewed was noticed by Thomas Mann in a vivid passage that deserves quotation:

> The overpowering accents of the music that accompanies Siegfried's funeral cortège no longer tell of the woodland boy who set out to learn the meaning of fear; they speak to our emotions of what is *really* passing away behind the lowering veils of mist: it is the sun-hero himself who lies upon the bier, slain by the pallid forces of darkness—and there are hints in the text to support what we *feel* in the music: "A wild boar's fury," it says, and: "Behold the cursed boar," says Gunther, pointing to Hagen, "who slew this no-

> ble flesh." The words take us back at a stroke to the very earliest picture-dreams of mankind. Tammuz and Adonis, slain by the boar, Osiris and Dionysus, torn asunder to come again as the Crucified One, whose flank must be ripped open by a Roman spear in order that the world might know Him—all things that ever were and ever shall be, the whole world of beauty sacrificed and murdered by wintry wrath, all is contained within this single glimpse of myth.[22]

The *Ring* is an epic, a myth that consciously subsumes the story of humankind and the origin of evil. It breaks free at every point from the limitations of the tragic stage and shifts like a novel from character to character and sphere to sphere. *Tristan und Isolde,* by contrast, presents a single tightly compacted situation, with a handful of characters, and a *dénouement* that is both foreseeable and also foreseen from the outset of the drama. It is not surprising, therefore, that in *Tristan und Isolde* the parallels with Greek tragedy are especially pronounced. The two lovers are manifest outsiders, one of whom has magic powers and both of whom have the elevated social status of the Greek tragic hero. Their fault is not voluntary, but rather the result of a force more powerful than themselves—although a force that translates itself into voluntary actions, and *must* do so if it is to be understood for what it is. At the same time the fault undermines the community, threatening not merely the moral order and the dignity of the king but also the alliance forged by the royal marriage, on which the safety of Cornwall now depends. As with Agamemnon, Oedipus, Creon, and Antigone, the destiny of a state is bound up with these private passions, and the search for emotional quietus is also a quest for civil peace.

King Marke is Tristan's maternal uncle, and in patrilineal societies the maternal uncle is the symbol of alliance, the one who enters the bloodstream from outside and who therefore joins the family to a wider kinship group. Claude Lévi-Strauss has argued that you can understand the family only if you see this external alliance-relation as part of its structure, since the mother's brothers are the foundation of a defensive strategy that the family needs for survival.[23] The story of Tristan turns on the hero's

role as alliance maker—a role that he himself reduces to an empty shell, by the look that steals the heart of Isolde.

Wagner's two victims are unlike the Greek tragic heroes, however, in several vital respects. The first is that the force working on them is generated inwardly, within the self. As Ruth Padel has persuasively argued, the Greek tragedy sets its characters in a web of external forces, and their emotions are seen as acting on them from outside.[24] The love potion symbolizes the idea of sexual desire as rooted in the flesh. But it is also an emblem of the fact that desire is nobody's responsibility but mine, and is the individual outcome of a process taking place *in me*. This is made explicit by Tristan in act 3 in the great meditation that leads to his ambivalent curse of the drink, when he identifies *himself* as the one who brewed it. This moment parallels the moment of recognition in the Greek tragedy; but the thing that is recognized is not an external destiny or a God's inexorable punishment, but an inner identification with sexual desire and an assumption of desire by the self.

Wagner's victims are unlike Greek tragic heroes in another way, too, which is that they accept their fate but not their guilt, and have no other aim than the death that finally releases them. Their story is not a tragedy, even if it is called that by the minnesinger Hans Sachs. Indeed, it exemplifies the reversal that Girard discerns in the Christian idea of martyrdom—the final silencing of aggression by the self-offering of innocent life. For their innocence is publicly proven and accepted, at the very moment when they are offered up in death. The Christian Eucharist offers us redemption *from* death; Wagner offers redemption *in* death. But what is offered has important elements in common with the Christian idea of redemption, and is as far from the realm of tragedy as is the sacred ritual that forms the axis of *Parsifal*.

In some (but by no means all) of the surviving Greek tragedies it is the chorus, representing the community as a whole, that benefits from the hero's suffering. A kind of redemption is offered, not in the form of eternal life or salvation but in the form of a restored moral order. The community is purged of *miasma,* released from the dread cycle of vengeance, and confirmed in the gods' beneficent overlordship. The hero's destruction comes about by divine necessity, working through human

will. The process that leads to the hero's death is also a test of his virtue; his redeeming function depends upon his exemplary nature, which enables him to accept the divine imperative that requires his death and which, through that death, releases the community. By the end of *Tristan und Isolde,* by contrast, the community has sunk away entirely and neither loses nor benefits from the death of the outcasts who disturbed its calm.

Finally, the story of Tristan and Isolde is told almost entirely from the victims' point of view. This is emphasized by its symmetrical structure. Each act begins with the lovers and their predicament, exploring the psychic reaches of their passion. And each act ends as the world of the community bursts in, first to give vivid reality to the lovers' fault, secondly to exact punishment, and thirdly to forgive. In the first act Isolde, tormented by the conflict in her feelings, summons Tristan to come to her and resolve on death. Her attitude is peremptory, indignant, and ashamed. In the second act she awaits Tristan impatiently and again summons him, though this time with a permission rather than a command. Now they long for death, not as the prevention but as the culmination of their love. In the third act Tristan, in his delirium, summons Isolde from afar to join him in the death on which they had resolved, and which had been implicit in the look that first disarmed Isolde. This time she comes not as a victim of the community but as a part of it, bringing ritual forgiveness in which she too, dying, is included.

All this has a peculiar inner logic that is almost impossible to put into words, but which Wagner expresses in music of such originality and power that the audience is left in no doubt that something of great spiritual significance has occurred on the stage. As with Greek tragedy, we are involved in the action as we might be involved in a religious rite. Unlike the protagonists of tragedy, however, Tristan and Isolde are not destroyed by external forces or overcome by fate, but instead approach their death in a spirit of quasi-Christian renunciation, wanting nothing from the world save their final union in nothingness. If we are to understand the drama, therefore, we should try to make sense of the idea that something is achieved by the death of the lovers, something for which "redemption" is not too exaggerated a term.

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SEVEN

Love, Death, and Redemption

Die Welt ist arm für den, der niemals krank genug für diese "Wollust der Hölle" gewesen ist . . .
—Nietzsche, on *Tristan und Isolde.*[1]

In ritual sacrifice the victim is offered as a gift and an expiation. It is the congregation that is redeemed, as the god takes the consecrated offering and offers it back as a pledge. This transfiguration of the victim from sacrificial offering to sacred meal is an archetypal miracle—a transubstantiation that is experienced inwardly by each participant but never observed. In *Tristan und Isolde* the victims themselves are redeemed, and this redemption is to be thought of as a purely human achievement involving no miracles, no supernatural powers, no transubstantiation, but merely the aura of seclusion and inviolability that attaches naturally to the object of erotic love.

In chapter 5 I developed a conception of the erotic that reflects the Kantian philosophy of the human condition and which is also, I maintain, presupposed by Wagner's drama. Indeed, it is a conception that has some claim to be a human universal, since it accounts for what no other conception of the erotic, in my view, can explain, namely the intimate connection between sexual desire and erotic love, and the phenomena of shame, arousal, and the glance that collectively situate desire in the realm of intersubjective and interpersonal relations. Sociobiological theories of the kind first offered by Schopenhauer explain *some* of these phenomena in terms of the underlying reproductive function—but only some. They

do not explain (because they are bound to ignore) the peculiar intentionality of desire and its role in our understanding of the human person. Thus sociobiology can explain why jealous people wish to destroy their rivals, but not why they wish to destroy their faithless lovers.

In desire we encounter the mystery of our incarnation. We do not necessarily *see* it as a mystery. But the mystery affects us nonetheless, through the caresses, glances, and blushes that work on us like spells. We can build on these things and heighten them: a process of idealization is already incipient in them, prompting lovers to single each other out as incarnations of a unique but possessible selfhood. The process of idealization is shaped by culture and feeds automatically into our sense of the sacred. The object of desire is represented through concepts of purity and pollution, of sanctity and desecration, and it is the transition between these states that is dramatized in the story of Troilus and Cressida. It is because the object of desire has been perceived in this way that jealousy takes the murderous form that Shakespeare puts before us in *Othello.* Desdemona, in Othello's eyes, has been ransacked and polluted, like a violated temple, and only her death can extinguish this sacrilege and restore the preexisting holiness.

The sense of the sacred is a human universal, and it is plausible to suggest, therefore, that its grounds are to be discovered a priori, by examining what is distinctive in the human condition. In the last analysis (though it is a work of intricate philosophy to demonstrate it) reason, freedom, and self-consciousness are names for a single condition, which is that of a creature who does not merely think, feel, and do, but who also asks the questions of what to think, what to feel, and what to do. These questions compel a unique perspective on the physical world. We look on the world in which we find ourselves from a point of view at its very edge: the point of view where *I* am. We are simultaneously in the world and not of the world, and we try to make sense of this peculiar fact with images of the soul, the psyche, the self, or the "transcendental subject."[2] These images do not result from philosophy only: they arise naturally, in the course of a life in which the capacity to justify and criticize our thoughts, beliefs, feelings, and actions is the basis of the social order that makes us what we are. The point of view of the subject is therefore an essential feature of

the human condition. And it is precisely the tension between this point of view and the world of objects that gives rise to the experience of sanctity. The sacred derives from and elaborates a day-to-day revelation: the sudden glimpse of the free and transcendental being in the most ordinary things of this world.

In my everyday relations with you I unproblematically attribute speech, gesture, and expression to a single source, and identify that source as you, here, now. You *are* this living creature, and you, the rational being who is the target of my love, anger, affection, or inquiry communicate not through your body or by means of it, but *in* it. In desire, however, the relation between you and your body is radically changed for me: I become conscious of your incarnation and of the fact that this body is not you but *yours*. You are the free self-conscious being whose flesh this is, and this flesh is the means to possess you. To touch this flesh without the rite of mutual acquiescence is to pollute what I desire, by recasting your body as an object.

This experience prefigures our experience of the sacred. Sacred things are removed, held apart, and untouchable—or touchable only after purifying rites. They owe these features to their inherent supernatural power—a spirit that has claimed them as its own. In seeing places, buildings, and artifacts as sacred, we in effect project onto the material world the experience that we receive from each other, when incarnation becomes a "real presence" and we perceive the other as forbidden to us and untouchable. It is plausible to suggest, therefore, that sexual desire provides us with some of the primary material from which the experience of the sacred is constructed. That was why it appealed to Wagner as the core subject of his music dramas.

But there is another such primary material, and that is death. It too presents us with the mystery of our incarnation, though it does so in another way. In death we confront the body voided of the soul, an object without a subject, limp, ungoverned, and inert. The awe that we feel in the face of death is a response to the unfathomable spectacle of human flesh without the self. The dead body is not so much an object as a void in the world of objects. In all societies the dead are treated with reverence: they become untouchable precisely in the moment when the self retreats

from them. Somehow this body still belongs to the person who has vanished: I imagine him as exerting his claim over it from spectral regions where he cannot be touched. In encountering death, therefore, our imagination reaches spontaneously toward the supernatural. The dead body, by becoming sacred, exposes itself also to desecration—a fact upon which the drama of *Antigone* turns. Just as sex and death provide us with two of our primary experiences of the sacred, therefore, they also present us with a primary threat of desecration.

This tentative theory of the sacred is not a piece of empirical anthropology; nor is it an exercise in cultural criticism of the kind that I identified in Burkert and Girard. It is a piece of philosophy, an attempt to derive the intentionality of religious awe a priori from a Kantian metaphysic of the self. If I am right, then the experience of the sacred is a human universal, bound up with our very existence as self-conscious, rationally choosing subjects. So much, it seems to me, is confirmed by the anthropological data. But I have also identified sexual desire and death as two of the sources from which that experience is drawn—two of the existential predicaments that compel us toward a transcendental perspective. Perhaps this is true of death, but is it really true of desire? Wagner attempts to persuade us that it is so, in *Tristan und Isolde,* in *Parsifal,* and in the last act of *Siegfried*. But is this any more than special pleading on behalf of a transitory and romantic conception of sexual love?

I have tried to deflect that skeptical response in chapter 5 and in the earlier discussion of the literature of courtly love. However, more needs to be said. For even if people once understood the sexual act through quasi-religious conceptions, it might be argued, they do so no longer. There is now neither pollution nor taboo, but instead an easygoing market in sexual commodities—a market that can be entered without shame and left without damage.

However, this demystification of desire has not been achieved without fundamental changes to the human psyche. Henry James wrote a century ago of the "decline in the sentiment of sex,"[3] and the process to which he referred has accelerated since then. The sexual experience, treated as "recreation," becomes detached from interpersonal responses and retreats to a sensation in the procreative parts. Desire freed from moral con-

straints, and from the ethic of pollution and taboo, is a new and highly artificial state of mind maintained in being by forms of discourse and representation that are devoted to displaying the human body as an object. Pornography—which has lingered in the wings of emotional life from the beginning of time and always been recognized as a temptation—has now come into its own. Its purpose is to eliminate the encounter between subjects and to put the contact of objects in its place.

When the erotic kiss first became obligatory on the cinema screen it was construed as a coming together of faces, each fully personalized through dialogue. The two faces had carried the burden of a developing drama and were inseparable in thought from the individuals whose faces they were. When, in the last seconds of the Hollywood movie, the faces tremblingly approached each other to be clichéd together in a clinch, the characters sank away from us into their mutual desire. This desire was their own affair, a kind of avenue out of the story that took them quickly off the screen. The kiss was felt by the audience as a reward for the labor of being real individuals in a world where individuality is always to some extent a cultural and moral achievement.

Pornography is the opposite: the face is more or less ignored, and in any case is endowed with no personality and made party to no human dialogue. Only the sexual organs, construed not as agents but as patients, or rather impatients, carry the burden of contact. Sexual organs, unlike faces, can be treated as instruments; they are rival means to the common end of friction, and therefore essentially substitutable. Pornography refocuses desire not on the other who is desired but on the sexual act itself, viewed as a meeting of bodies. The intentionality of the sexual act, conceived in this disenchanted way, is radically changed. It ceases to be an expression of interpersonal longing, still less of the desire to hold, to possess, to be filled with love. It becomes a kind of sacrilege—a wiping away of freedom, personality, and transcendence, to reveal the obscene contortions of what is merely flesh. Hence, despite appearances, pornography confirms what I have said about desire: that it is one of the raw materials from which our sense of the sacred is built.[4]

Even in present circumstances, therefore, sexual projects are haunted by sanctity. A kind of Baudelairean satanism moves people to look for

new ways of desecrating the sexual object, of hunting down what is unpolluted, innocent, or forbidden, so as to expose it to some violating abuse. More important even than pornography is the tendency to sexualize children and to render them enticing—not enticing as premature adults but enticing precisely as *children,* as people unequipped for responsible emotion, whose bodies are still out of bounds and who can therefore be profaned and polluted by the sexual act. The lust for desecration is the other side of the belief in sanctity and can be seen as the inevitable outcome of the attempt to sever desire from commitment and to put sex on sale. Denis de Rougemont saw Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* as a version of the "Tristan myth" because the novel deals with forbidden passion. But *Lolita* is better seen as a strenuous attempt to recreate the sacred by showing the desecration of a child by adult appetites, and by portraying the incongruity between her transitory urges and her lover's unassuageable desire.

I mention these unpleasant things because they help us understand the underlying religious message of *Tristan und Isolde.* When writing of the "redemption" achieved by his lovers, Wagner is using this term in its true religious sense, to mean a regaining of the sacred in a world where sacrilege is the prevailing danger. Whatever Wagner's metaphysical beliefs, he did not correspond to the idea of the "nonreligious man," as Mircea Eliade, in a famous book, defined him:

> [The non-religious man] accepts no model for humanity outside the human condition as it can be seen by the various historical situations. Man *makes himself,* and he only makes himself completely in proportion as he desacralizes himself and the world. The sacred is the prime obstacle to his freedom. He will become himself only when he is totally demysticized. He will not be truly free until he has killed the last god.[5]

Wagner agrees that man makes himself, but not that he does so by desacralizing himself and the world. On the contrary, the message of Wagner's greatest works is that man makes himself by *sacralizing* himself, and that by sacralizing himself he also sacralizes the world. Moreover, this act of sacralization is not an obstacle to freedom; it is the opposite. It comes

about through the recognition in both self and other of the transcendental freedom that invites us to sacrifice. By setting aside the empirical world and its claims, by scorning death for the sake of a goal that only free beings can embrace or conceive, the act of sacrifice sanctifies the one who performs it. It brings the sacred into being. And once we recognize that the sacred too is a human invention, redemption becomes a possibility—redemption by our own devices and without the aid of a god. Sexual love, for Wagner, is the proof of this, since it leads us to prefer union with the other to life without the other, and at the same time endows both self and other with a supernatural nimbus.

The redemption through love that Wagner dramatizes in his mature operas is not an escape into another world in which the sufferings of this one are finally compensated. It is rather a demonstration of the value of this world by showing that something else is valued more. The sacred moment, in which death is scorned for the sake of love, casts its light back over the entire life that had led to it. Redemption does not consist in some Platonic ascent toward the transcendental. It consists in a changed perception of the empirical world—a recognition that freedom really does exist in this world and that we too possess it. And this freedom is discovered in the most earthbound of our passions—the passion of erotic love. As with the Christian vision, redemption requires incarnation; but in Wagner incarnation is no longer God's means to redeem us *from* the world, but *our* means to redeem ourselves *in* it.

In *Tristan und Isolde* the community has been forced into the background, to erupt at the end of each act in a bustling, bewildering tableau of the daylight world. In that world the lovers play formalized and meaningless roles, and from it they retreat into the night, where boundaries are blurred and distinctions dissolved. Night is the sphere of concealment and transgression; it is also the emblem of death, and the lovers' longing for night represents the fusion of the two deeper longings that animate them: the longing for each other and the longing not to be. At the same time the world of others breaks in to announce, in succinct and brilliantly dramatized images, the duties, laws, and ceremonies on which a community depends and which the lovers are defying.

There is no tragic conflict here between incompatible but absolute

laws; nor are the lovers unwilling or unknowing victims of the force that is working to destroy them. Although their love is a threat to the community, it is not the community but they who will benefit from death. As King Marke recognizes too late, the correct solution to the problem posed by his wife's passion for his nephew is to relinquish the wife to the nephew and to retire decently from the scene, a course of action that would safeguard the inheritance and restore the community's confidence in the royal authority. But this solution was not something that the lovers ever wanted—they had been prepared from the beginning as a sacrifice, and to forgive them before death was upon them would violate a ritual need. It would normalize and neutralize their passion, and so remove the circumstances that would demonstrate its redemptive power.

Here we begin to see the extraordinary cunning behind Wagner's dramatic idea in act 2. He has provided the setting required for a sacrifice. The community is assembled, the victims identified, the knife sharpened, the altar prepared, and the whole imbued by an overwhelming sense of necessity. Then the community drops away, leaving only the personal feelings of King Marke, which are not objective and law-governed but part of the same inner realm as the love between Tristan and Isolde. King Marke comes on the scene not as the law-making judge but as the betrayed uncle, tied to Tristan by a bond of love and now peering through his nephew's eyes into a realm of darkness that defies all worldly authority and power. Hence, although Marke is accompanied by a crowd that in conventional opera would form a chorus, expressing the communal voice in the face of private transgression, the onlookers remain silent, dumbfounded, like a community that has lost faith in itself. Something is happening here, but it is not their concern. They look through it as though it were glass. And although Melot responds at last to the offense, his motive is private jealousy, not public outrage. For this very reason, incidentally, Tristan cannot immediately die from Melot's wound, since this would reduce his death to the status of an ordinary murder rather than a sacrifice. And for a similar reason it is necessary for Melot to reappear in act 3 to be instantly slain by Kurwenal, so that all debts of mundane vengeance should be settled before the final ritual offering—Isolde's *Verklärung*—can be made.

The sacrificial character of the conclusion to act 2 answers to the sacramental character of the conclusion to act 1. At that earlier stage, believing Tristan does not reciprocate her feelings, Isolde feels her desire as a pollution and yearns for purification and sacrifice. In offering the drink of atonement she is not merely inviting Tristan to die with her: she is in some way blessing their union and at the same time implying that death will redeem their earthly failings. Although she alludes to the specific crimes that Tristan supposedly committed against her, it is also clear that the real fault for which Tristan must atone is, in Schopenhauer's words, "the crime of existence itself." In other words, the fault is hers in succumbing to a desire of which this mortal creature is the irreplaceable object. The look that captured Isolde's heart attached her forever to Tristan and made his very existence as an independent individual unbearable to her. Only lasting union could atone for this fault, but the union must also extinguish the very thing that torments her: Tristan's existence.

The allusion to the Christian Eucharist is evident. The important point, however, is not what links the communion cup and the *Sühnetrank,* but what distinguishes them. The first represents the ritual sacrifice of Christ the Redeemer, who through his death atones for the sins of the world. The second symbolizes the ritual sacrifice of the one who drinks it and who, dying, atones for his own existence. Wagner is presenting in dramatic outline the image of man as his own redeemer. He is suggesting that we can achieve the transfiguration for which it is in our nature to yearn with no help from God. At the same time this transfiguration has all the sacred character of a religious experience: it is a "moving out" from this world into a more sacred sphere, a sphere of utter safety.

Death is withheld at the end of *Tristan*'s first act not merely for the drama's sake but for a deep religious reason. The sacrificial victim can be offered only after purification, which means a casting off of worldly things so as to cross the threshold out of this life purged of all attachments other than the supreme attachment to which the sacrifice bears witness. In the case of Tristan and Isolde, this means suffering the harsh discipline of a love that rejects entirely the things of this world—a love that defies all the customs and conventions attaching us to our fellows, and which is in constant flight from the surrounding normality. The only peace that such a

love can offer is the peace evoked in act 2: the peace of extinction. The musical process in that act consists in a delicate rearranging of the lovers' passion, so that it reaches beyond itself to a consummation "not of this world." What we hear, therefore, is a process of lustration, which fits the lovers for death.

But still the sacrifice cannot be made. There are dramatic reasons for this delay: as I argued in chapter 2, we do not have the insight into Tristan's character that will show this love to be as much a destiny for him as it is for Isolde. But there are religious reasons, too. The victims are prepared for the sacrifice; the world is not. Only when the victims are seen by their slayers as pure, innocent, already representative of that higher realm to which they are proceeding, is their death an act of redemption. Otherwise it is murder—and it is Melot's attempt at murder that postpones the sacred offering and brings the action to a temporary stop.

Act 3 takes us into Tristan's inner world and acquaints us with his blameless suffering. He becomes, for us, "the man of sorrows" from whose sacrifice redemption proceeds. As he drifts in and out of consciousness, visiting the realm of Night but constantly returning in search of Isolde, another purification occurs. What we witness—or rather, what we hear—is an inner and subjective version of the outer purification that had been accomplished in act 2. In that act the lovers had freed themselves from all attachment to the world of Day. Now Tristan is freeing himself inwardly from his own life as an individual. His past, and the sufferings that have endowed him with his uniqueness and selfhood, are rearranged by the music as a kind of extended prelude to his love. Isolde is read back into the circumstances that preceded her, and the music impresses Tristan's life with the stamp of his imminent extinction. His vision of Isolde, as he both imagines and believes her approaching, is the equivalent of a revelation—a sudden recognition that it was for their love that he existed, and for which he will die. When Tristan tears the bandages from his wound, it is clear that he is offering himself and that this death is the final "singling out" that brings love to fruition. Meanwhile the world has assembled in a posture of forgiveness, recognizing the blameless nature of the victims and the rightness of all that has been done. Now at last the sacrifice can be completed, and it sheds its redeeming light over the audi-

ence, compelling the feeling that all is as it should be and that, through their suffering, the lovers have risen to a higher plane. In this way their death justifies their love, just as their love justifies their death.

In the medieval stories Tristan's death results from a series of delays linked to the lovers' separation and to the hostility of King Mark and Isolt of the White Hands. Mark does not forgive, except (in later versions) when the lovers are already dead and buried. The world remains hostile to Tristan's love, and this hostility is the ultimate cause of his destruction. In Wagner, however, partly because of the enormous dramatic concentration but more importantly because of the underswell of religious sentiment, the question arises as to whether it was inevitable, after all, that Tristan should die. Tristan's wound can be healed by Isolde, and Tristan knows this. Marke, meanwhile, having heard of the love potion, forgives his wife and nephew and hurries after Isolde in the hope of bringing peace and reconciliation. All these plans for a happy ending are frustrated by Tristan, who dies because he tears the bandages from his wound before Isolde has had the chance to apply her healing hands to it.

I am tempted to respond to this kind of objection as Wagner did, by referring once again to the *real* drama, which is occurring in outline on the stage but whose full force is flowing through the music. The music of act 3 shapes Tristan's state of mind as a "being-toward-death," to use Heidegger's idiom. Although Tristan's love for Isolde is a forbidden love, the music shows us that it is not the world's forbidding but his own inner permitting that is directing him toward death. Tristan's love is intrinsically death-directed, as is Isolde's, and any other fate would compromise the purity of their desire. Marriage, household, budgets, children—which belong to the world of Day and have their justification in society—would pollute this heroic love, drag it down into the world of calculation, and negate its iconic value as the symbol of what we all, in love's first passion, can aspire to. Hence, although Tristan's death might seem from a certain perspective like an accident or a mistake, it is, from the point of view of the emotions that are driving act 3 to its conclusion, a necessity. With the minimum of theatrical contrivance, Wagner brings this home by creating onstage a sequence of tableaux, each of which is filled in by the music with meanings that the tableaux do not in themselves supply.

The question raised by Tristan's death is familiar, in another context, from the Gospels. During the days prior to his Passion, Christ's conduct, the situations in which he puts himself, his provocative words, and his yet more provocative silences are death-directed. He seems expressly to put himself in the way of death, so that even Pilate, though convinced of his innocence, cannot find the means to save him. At the same time, his death comes through a series of mistakes or accidents—the kiss of Judas, the appearance of Barabbas—that might at any point be avoided. None of this strikes the reader as incongruous. On the contrary, the religious message that drives the narrative impresses on us the absolute necessity of the outcome. The moving words and gestures of the Last Supper (e.g., Matt. 26:26–29) are preparations for a sacrificial offering. The narrative is summoning religious sentiments that demand just such a terminus, and the Crucifixion is being prepared as a redemption long before the gloss that the Evangelist puts on it.

The parallel reminds us, however, of an outstanding problem. The Eucharist is not merely a symbolic reenactment of a sacrificial act. It is the expression of a theological doctrine and the occasion for participation in a mystery that is rationalized by that doctrine as an avenue to God. Holy Communion is not a theatrical event, appreciated for its aesthetic completion. It is a real spiritual process whereby a congregation is relieved of the burden of its sinfulness and made ready for salvation. If Wagner's drama is to emulate such a rite, it too must be completed, if not by a theological doctrine at least by a moral vision that is in some way symbolized in the act of sacrifice, so as to impress itself on us as a valid option which we too might choose.

In other words, if we are to allow the religious symbolism of *Tristan und Isolde* to work its undeniable enchantment, we must associate it with a species of sincere commitment and a way of life that could inspire us to adopt it. Redemption through love as portrayed in the *Liebestod* must strike us as a moral possibility—not offered, perhaps, to everyone but enacted before us as poetry and made real in art. We are not being invited to believe that the lovers choose death as the lesser of evils or as a way out of an intolerable predicament. We are being invited to sympathize with, and perhaps even concur in, their view of death as an incontro-

vertible good that lifts them to a higher status and brings their love to fruition.

This raises in an acute form a problem inconclusively discussed by T. S. Eliot in his essay "Poetry and Belief."[6] Eliot criticized Shelley's atheism not because he believed atheism to be false (although he did) but because he believed that Shelley expressed it in a puerile way. Style, language, and imagery become, in the vicinity of Shelley's God-defying posture, mechanical, rhetorical, and unconvincing. According to Eliot, it is impossible to associate the poet's declared beliefs with anything but the shallowest of emotions and the most insubstantial of moral postures toward the world. What we look for in a poet's doctrines is not truth but life—for that is the only proof that poets can give of the moral validity of their outlook. Hence the critic's emphasis on sincerity, and the near universal revulsion against sentimentality (i.e., fake emotion) in art. What Shelley offers us, however, with his atheistic credo is not life but a cheap imitation—a bundle of self-vaunting gestures that mark no serious moral path.

Eliot's thoughts about Shelley—which I have presented for the sake of argument and not by way of endorsing them—become much clearer when we think of Shelley's poetry as an attempt at religion. Religions involve two distinct psychic phenomena: the religious experience, in which we are filled with the divine presence and made whole, and the system of belief that arises from this experience and purports to explain it. The test of the belief system is not its truth—for it lies beyond all proof. The test is the experience that the belief system rationalizes. Does this experience have the redemptive and transfiguring quality of true religion? If not, then the belief system is no better than a sham, a doctrine by which we cannot live—live, that is, at the higher level that the religious experience promises. Shelley's atheism is, in Eliot's view at least, a paltry substitute for faith, of no intrinsic authority precisely because it derives from no such transfiguring experience.

The case of Wagner is almost the reverse. There is a belief system to be extracted from Wagner's music dramas. But the real test of that system—the intense transfiguring experience on which it is no more than an abstruse commentary—is never in doubt, since it is there before us in

the music. It is clear that bits of Schopenhauer, bits of oriental mysticism, and bits of medieval romance had all congealed together in Wagner's mind as a kind of theological reinforcement to the worldview expressed in *Tristan und Isolde*. But that worldview is sui generis. Wagner accepts Schopenhauer's vision of death as a dissolution of the individual, but he rejects Schopenhauer's theory of the will as the only ultimate reality. On the contrary, the ultimate reality for Wagner is the human individual—the incarnate subject of consciousness as revealed in the look of love. It is in this light, I suggest, that we should explore the victims' own view of their sacrifice so as to understand how they might be redeemed by it and how we too, observing, might obtain a kind of consolation in their fate.

As I remarked in chapter 1, Wagner was not in any orthodox sense a believer. But nor was he an unbeliever, content like Shelley to jettison the religious attitude to the world. He was a quasi-believer who wished to reattach the symbols of religion to their undying meaning—a meaning that had been distorted by materialist society and theological doctrine but which is as real for us as it was for medieval Christian society. As self-conscious individuals our primary need is for meaning, and our ever recurring fear is the fear of death. Religion provides that meaning and overcomes that fear; but it does so through baseless promises that offer redemption from a point outside our human world and on a metaphysical assumption that is no longer credible. Only if man can produce meaning from his own resources, and vanquish the fear of death in the same act, is the consolation of religion now available. The lingering afterimage of an old theology tells us that meaning lies in some reward offered when life is over. But more noble, more dignified, and more in tune with the deep needs of religious man is the belief that meaning is its own reward. On this view, life becomes meaningful when it throws rewards away—in other words, when it is self-sacrificed. By enfolding this sacrifice within the sacred aura of the erotic, Wagner offers the final proof that man can become holy to himself with no help from the gods.

From the external point of view—the point of view of the other—the value of sacrifice is evident. Sacrifice is the proof of love, and the two great loves on which human society depends—family love and love of country—depend on sacrifice.[7] From the internal point of view—the

point of view of the self—however, the value of sacrifice lies in a mystery, and the mystery is recorded in many different ways by those who have stood on the brink of it. Patočka wrote influentially of the sacrificial character of modern warfare and of the awareness of freedom that comes to us in the senseless act of throwing life away.[8] Luc Ferry, in less drastic vein, has written of the need to value something more than life if one's life is to be meaningful, and has suggested love as the higher value whose worth is proved in the act of sacrifice.[9] Many secular moralists of the modern period, from D. H. Lawrence to Ortega y Gasset, have given voice to the same idea, and the first and greatest of them was Wagner—greatest because he saw that the idea makes no proper sense without the mystery it encapsulates, and that the mystery must be not described but *shown*. Wagner's dramas center on acts of sacrifice that involve both accepting death and seeing death as less important than the love that propels us toward it.

If religion is a form of theological belief, complete with promises of an afterlife, and a system of rewards and punishments that provides a motive for good behavior on earth, then the religious ritual becomes a symbol of those beliefs and promises. It reminds us of our future state and present sinfulness and calls us to repentance. But, as I have argued, Wagner saw things the other way around. It is not that the ritual symbolizes the doctrine but that the doctrine is an allegory of the ritual. The meaning of religion resides in the ritual, and this ritual occurs here and now, in an act of sacrifice. Redemption, in the Christian doctrine, means the release from punishment and the granting of eternal life. For Wagner, however, redemption is not a condition that is purchased through sacrifice. It occurs in the act of sacrifice itself. Life has endowed Tristan and Isolde with a wholly individualizing love; they are exalted by this love and by the suffering it causes; rather than be sundered from each other, therefore, they long to die. Dying for the sake of their love, they offer the final proof of it—as a condition that is more valuable than life itself. But paradoxically it is life—in its fullest sense of achieved and outward-going individuality—that is expressed in their love. By valuing their love to the point of renouncing all else for the sake of it, they are therefore also valuing life. In true heroic manner, they prove that life has a value by throwing life

away. And this gesture, which redeems them by fulfilling their deepest longing, casts its redemptive glow over all of us as we perceive the potential nobility and worthwhileness of our carnal loves.

This perception enables us to understand what is accomplished in the last act of *Tristan und Isolde*. Tristan has wished to be united with Isolde in death, and to this end has invited Melot's wound. But Isolde has not joined him. Tristan, wandering in the antechamber of perpetual Night, has sensed this and recognized the incompleteness of his gesture. This incompleteness has two aspects—subjective and objective. Tristan has not achieved the mystic union with Isolde that his love required. And he has not perfected his ritual meaning as a victim—as one whose death is required by *others* in order that forgiveness should reign. Hence he longs for Isolde so that he can enter beside her into the kingdom of Night. She comes to him at last, bringing her own death and also general forgiveness. Only now can he die, for only now is his death a sacrifice. And the two senses of "sacrifice" correspond exactly to the two processes—subjective and objective—that are herein brought to completion. This fusion of the two processes hardly makes sense in words, which is why everything is left to the music—and what music! But the redemption offered by the *Liebestod* is no illusion. It offers the very thing that redemption is, namely a transcendence of the world of appetite into the realm of values. In the face of this transcendence, death can do no harm.

The music that we now know as the *Liebestod* was first described by Wagner, when arranging it as the second half of the well-known orchestral epitome, as Isolde's *"Verklärung"*—transfiguration. The stage direction tells us that *"Isolde sinkt, wie verklärt, . . . auf Tristans Leiche."* And in a program note Wagner elucidated the music thus:

> what Fate divided in life now springs into transfigured life in death: the gates of union are thrown open. Over Tristan's body the dying Isolde receives the blessed fulfillment of ardent longing, eternal union in measureless space, without barriers, without fetters, inseparable.[10]

The death of Isolde is also a transfiguration and a renewal, and the entire work of the music is to imprint this fact upon our innermost emo-

tions. Its success is sufficient dramatic proof that love can be fulfilled in death, when death is chosen, and that this fulfillment is a genuine redemption.

On the stage, with the compelling force of the music, the death of the lovers strikes us as inevitable, right, and supremely consoling. But what bearing has it on ordinary life? Is this real love, love as it is, or even as it could be in some world of pure ideals? Or is this so-called love really a mask for something else, something that we encounter when the sacred bull is slaughtered at the altar or the Son of God hung from the cross, and which arises from our unvisited and violent side?

As I have indicated, the connection with those sacred and terrible things is no accident. Wagner sets his characters deliberately within the forum where religion presides. Yet his drama is about love—real love, human love, and the renunciation that gives love its value. It is, if you like, a sacrificial consolation for the imperfect loves of those who witness it. We know that love, like us, is mortal; we know that it has its roots in animal need and the dark internal night of the organism; we know that it is mired in compromise and selfishness. All these facts about love are suggested in the drama and summarized in the fatal potion. We know all this, and yet we also know something else: that through love we are capable of sacrifice. Love leads us to sacrifice precisely through that aspect of it which nourishes our sense of the sacred: the individualizing intentionality that is disclosed in the look of love, and which we desecrate through all our compromises and substitutes. This sacrifice offers a kind of proof that we can transcend our mortal condition, that even in this passion that robs us of our freedom we are supremely free, that even in this predicament, especially in this predicament, we can become something higher than victims of our fate—namely, victims of *ourselves,* self-chosen offerings to Frau Minne.

This self-sacrifice is foretold in the look of love. By identifying with it we, the spectators, revisit our weak and compromised affections and see that in them too we defy the flesh. Death accepted for love's sake is a triumph over the empirical world, a final proof of freedom and personality against the meaningless flow of causes. The ritual sacrifice shows us this and thereby reattaches us to the world of human senti-

ment. Tristan and Isolde, from whom all emotions other than their mutual love are excluded, experience that love as a will to die. But through their sacrifice they restore belief in our human potential and renew in us the will to live. Hence the redemption of the lovers in death is also a renewal of the community in life. And that is the religious meaning of *Tristan und Isolde*.

EPILOGUE

From Romance to Ritual

Tristan und Isolde planted in the minds of modern artists a new vision of their goal, which was to present the secret regions of the psyche in ritualized and symbolic form. Its far-reaching influence on French symbolism and English romanticism should not blind us to the fact that its most enduring artistic legacy is to be observed in the modernists. Without *Tristan* there would not be modern music or modern literature as we know them. *Pelléas et Mélisande,* (both Schoenberg's and Debussy's), *Erwartung, Verklärte Nacht; Joseph and His Brothers, The Magic Mountain, Dr. Faustus; The Waste Land, Ulysses, Finnegans Wake, Four Quartets; Salome, Elektra, Lulu;* even *A la recherche du temps perdu*—in such masterpieces of modern music and literature we find the imprint of Wagner's great experiment. To reverse Jessie Weston's famous thesis, Wagner devised a new task for art: to retrace the steps from romance back to ritual, to move backward from the open, self-explaining narrative to the rite in which the human truth can be shown but not told.[1]

This task changed both the content of art and its form. Modernist works of art show *mysteries* that are presented but not, as a rule, explained. The puzzle of *Pelléas et Mélisande* remains unsolved in the opera—or rather, it is solved through itself. It is both the question and the answer, an enigma that is its own solution, like those dissonances described by Ernst Kurth that resolve onto versions and inversions of themselves, not answering the question but rearranging it. *The Waste Land* opens doors into strange interior scenes, in each of which some ritual is being repeated without explanation. And in case we think there is an explanation, the

footnotes are there to explain that there is none, guiding the reader to the very tradition of anthropological thinking that was begun by Wagner and which puts ritual in place of doctrine.

Even in those modernists who repudiated Wagner, the new focus is apparent. In Bartók's *Miraculous Mandarin* and *Bluebeard's Castle,* in Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring, Perséphone,* and *Les Noces,* in Pound's *Cantos* and Woolf's *Waves,* in the mock-classical theater of Cocteau and Anouilh, in the church parables of Britten and the *Sonnets to Orpheus* of Rilke, in the sculptures of Rodin and the early modernist works of Matisse and Picasso, we find the same emphasis on the moment of mystery, the ritualized core of meaning, where something is severed from its explanation and *displayed.* All these artists reveal a renewed interest in the sacred as a dominant human fact, and a belief in art as the most important modern route to it. This interest was fed from many sources, but the recognition that the sacred could be recuperated from art—against the current of unbelief—comes from Wagner. *Tristan und Isolde* was the luminous proof of what might otherwise have been a pious hope: that religion could live again in art and did not need God for its survival.

The new artistic task showed itself not only in the content of modernist art but also in the form. If art is to recuperate the mystery of human life and undo the deadly work of disenchantment, then it must rediscover the language of magic; it must work not through explanation but through spells. Mysteries are encrypted in a language that is not accessible to the profane. Understanding them involves a work of sacrifice—a denial and repudiation of worldly things. Through form an artist wins the freedom that the world denies—the freedom to approach the mystery of our condition and to present it once again to those who seek to know.

Although, as I have argued, *Tristan und Isolde* is a tonal work, there is no denying that it gave the first and most powerful impetus to this modernist conception of form—the conception of form as a *"Geheimnis,"* as Lorenz put it. The modernist work presents itself as a revelation that is available to the initiated but not to the profane. As with a liturgy, the language of modern art is one of absolute care and trepidation, in which there are no redundancies or digressions—since departures from the rite

are desecrations—but rather a constant dancing on the infinitesimal pinhead of significance, where the infinite mystery resides.

You hear this mystery in the very first measures of *Tristan und Isolde:* each note is spellbound by its neighbors, woven together with them into a collective presentation of a secret. What may sound accidental to the outsider is revealed to the initiate as necessary, compelled by the hidden constraints of a language that admits no departure from its mystic discipline. That first note—to the innocent ear a mere upbeat into a chromatic melody—is the hidden tonic of the ensuing exposition. The G-sharp that follows, when the chromatic melody hits a chord, becomes the companion to the initial A, bound to it in a melodic and harmonic marriage as leading note to tonic. The semitone is being dramatized, endowed with a burden of significance that will henceforth unfold continuously through the Prelude. At the same time, A and G-sharp are being singled out, as the lovers are singled out in the ritual that captures them. The chord that has worked this magic adds to it, too: for this chord contains all the intervals of the chromatic scale save the semitone itself. It succinctly contrasts the perfect fourth of tonal harmony with the potentially atonal augmented fourth that sounds beneath it. And it initiates that slow steady climb of the chromatic scale from G-sharp to G-sharp and finally, after a flourish, to A, which establishes these notes and the interval between them as centers of significance in the work as a whole. This inexorable melodic process is also harmonically ordered, as the A-minor triad is secretly spelled out through three successive dominant sevenths and then hidden once again in the concluding cadence.

The formal perfection of this passage is achieved without in any way detracting from its beauty: each voice in the orchestra sings melodiously, and none is without its own musical force. At the same time, however, the order perceived by the ear reflects, on closer study, another order—a quasi-mathematical, or at any rate arcane and cabalistic, play with intervals and relations, whose intricacy seems to be more than an intricacy of sound alone. In this sense *Tristan* prefigures that great change in modern music when notes were prized loose from their old harmonic and melodic relations and recodified. The secret of form in Wagner suggests the *secreted* form of Schoenberg and twelve-tone serialism.

We should see Schoenberg's serialism less as an extension of Wagner's chromaticism than as an individual contribution to the new artistic task: the task of presenting human mystery through formal magic. Form must be concealed in order to be revealed as meaning. Like a spell, it must not be explained or made easily accessible. It must work through secret relations that unfold with a necessity of their own—so creating the effect of an absolute release from the laws of this world. In short, Schoenberg's attitude to form is part of the shift from romance to ritual that was begun by Wagner. Through the hidden order of form the artist rediscovers the sacred moment, the moment in which meaning is revealed.

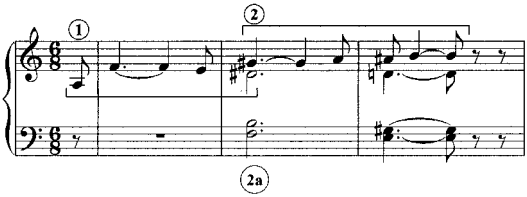
Much has changed since the early days of modernism. The task of resacralizing a desacralized world still occupies the attention of serious artists, writers, and composers; but their voices have been overwhelmed by a culture of desecration. The Kantian morality I have advanced in this book tells us that humanity cannot live by desecration, that if we do not rediscover the sacred moment we shall lose the perspective in which our freedom resides. Our lives will become literally meaningless. Wagner set out to rescue us from that predicament. His triumphant success in *Tristan und Isolde* is a beacon for all our lesser efforts and a reminder, in an increasingly dehumanized world, of what it is to be human.

APPENDIX

Table of Motives

I have tried to list all those themes, phrases, and ideas that have been identified as motives by those who have studied the score of *Tristan und Isolde*. Early commentators—notably Kobbé, Lavignac, Kufferath, and Cleather and Crump—were in the habit of giving names to the motives. Although this practice is now largely disapproved, it is not entirely unhelpful: hence I have given these names and sometimes used them in the course of my argument.

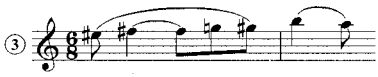
Not all the motives in this list are equally important. Some are brilliant but passing ideas that serve the dramatic purpose but disappear when the action moves on. Others are worked into the very life of the music and can be fully understood only in terms of the entire musical argument. Some might prefer to identify only these more structurally pregnant ideas as the true motives of the work. The reader is therefore at liberty to doubt whether motives 14, 19, 23, 25, 28, 31, 32, 34, 37, 40, 43, 44, 45, and 46 really deserve the name. Nevertheless I list them here, since it does no harm to include them and also offers a better synopsis of Wagner's more important ideas.



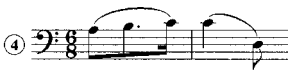
(1) = 'Tristan' (Kobbé), 'the avowal' (Lavignac), 'Tristan's Sorrow' (Cleather) 'yearning,' 'sorrow,' etc.

(2) = 'Isolde' (Kobbé), 'desire' (Lavignac), 'Isolde's magic'

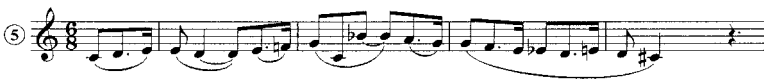
(2a) = the Tristan chord



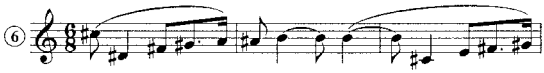
Variation of (2) ' Hero' motive (Cleather)



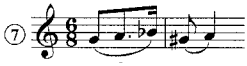
'Look' motive, varied retrograde of (1)



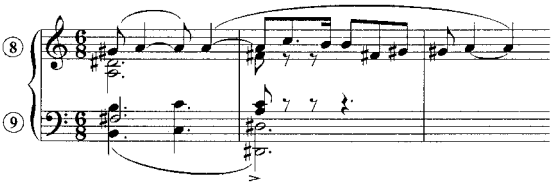
Elaboration of (4)



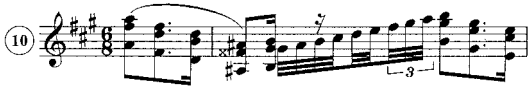
Further elaboration of (4), called 'the love potion' by Lavignac and Cleather



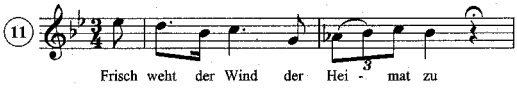
Variant of (6), associated with the 'ivy and vine' idea by Wagner, in a letter to Mathilde Wesendonck; called the 'the magic casket' by Lavignac.



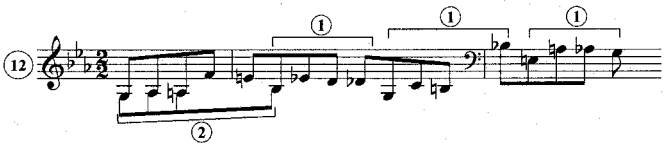
(8) = elaboration of (6), (9) = 'fate' (Verhängnis), 'poison,' 'death,' 'the drink of death,' etc.



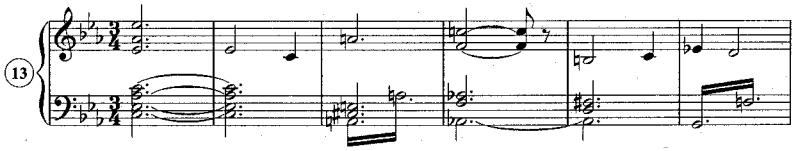
'Deliverance through death' (Lavignac), 'longing for death' (Cleather).



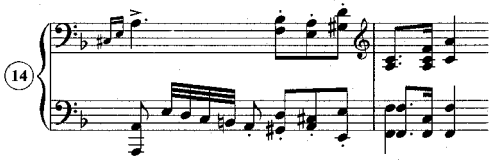
'Ocean,' 'sea,' 'crossing.'



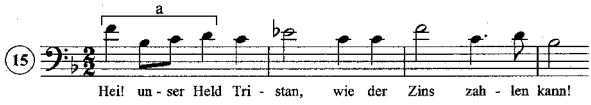
'Isolde's anger.' (1) and (2) combined and varied.



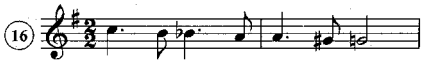
'Death-devoted head, death-devoted heart,' 'death.' Meditation on G♯/A, tailing off with (3).



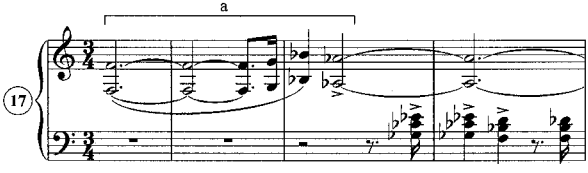
'Kurwenal.'



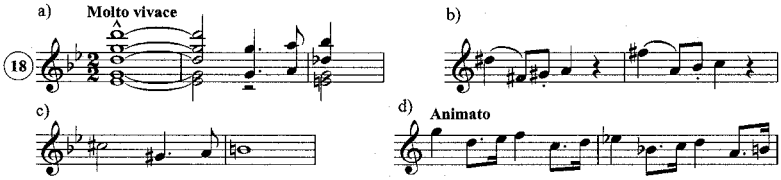
(15a) = 'Tristan's call' (Kobbé), 'the glory of Tristan' (Lavignac).



Variation of (1). 'Sick Tristan,' 'wounded Tristan' (Lavignac).

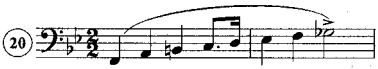


'Heroic Tristan' (Lavignac), 'destiny' (Kufferath), Morold (Cleather), 'Tristan's honour,' 'custom' (Sitte) 17a = variation of (3).

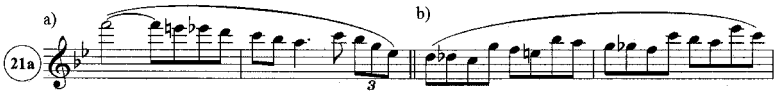


'Day' (18a) = (15a) in minor.

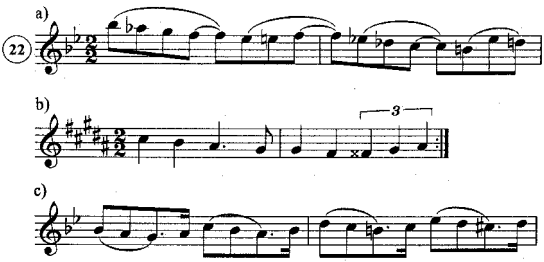
Variation of (18). Kobbé calls this 'night.'



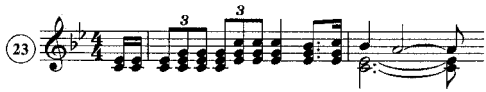
'Impatience.'



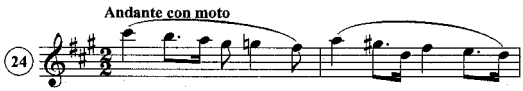
(21a) = variation of (1), (21b) related to (12). 'Love call' (Kufferath), 'ardour' (Lavignac), 'torch' motive (Cleather).



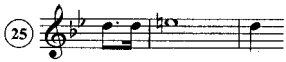
'Ecstasy,' 'passion,' etc.



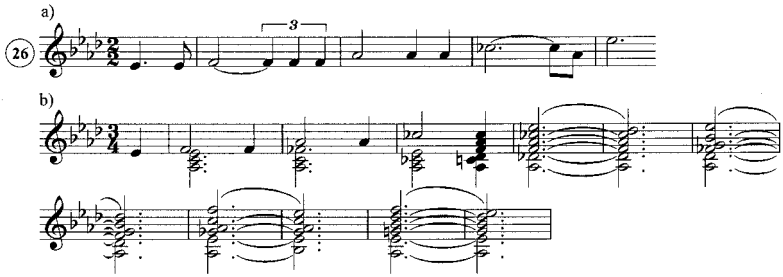
'Hunting call.'



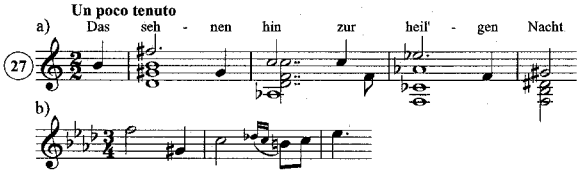
'Love' (Kufferath), 'the song of love' (Lavignac).



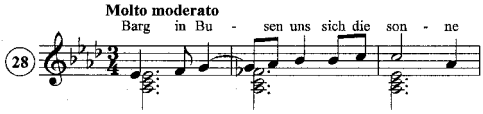
'The Summons' (Cleather).

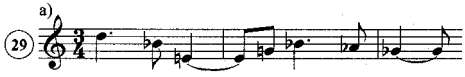


'Invocation of the night' (Lavignac).

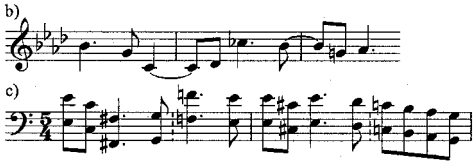


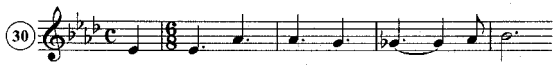
'Death the liberator' (Lavignac).



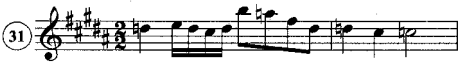


'Love's peace,' 'happiness,' 'eternal rest' (Cleather), variation of (10).

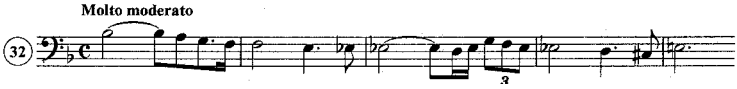




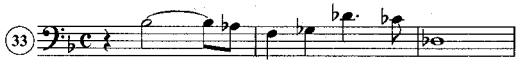
Variation of (1) 'Liebestod.'



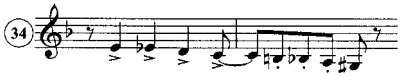
(Gruppetto)



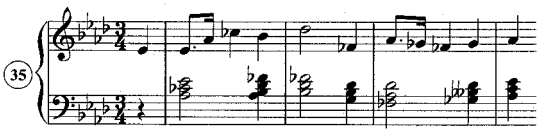
'Marke's grief.'

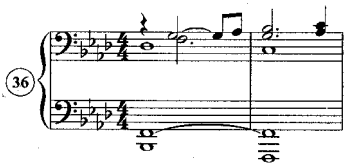


'Consternation' (Lavignac), 'Marke' (Kufferath).

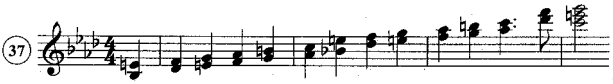


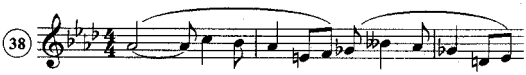
'Betrayal' motive (Cleather).



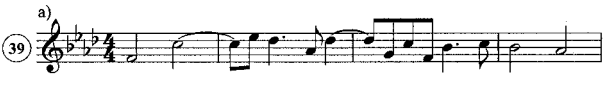


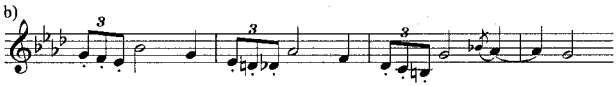
Variation of 2. 'Solitude' (Kufferath).

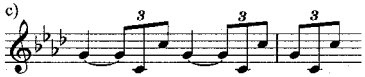


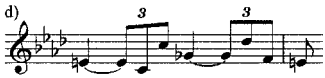


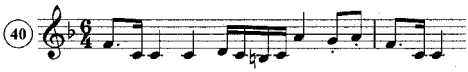
'Anguish' (Kobbé), 'distress,' 'Isolde as healer' (Lavignac, Kufferath).



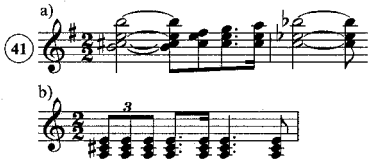




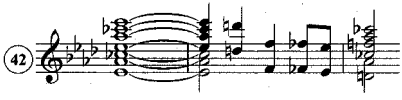




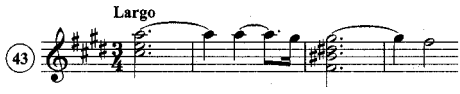
Kareol.

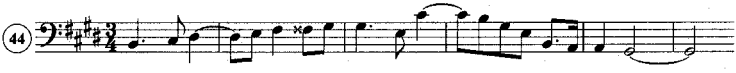


'Joy,' 'gratitude.' Variation of (2) (Kobbé) and/or (19) (Kufferath).

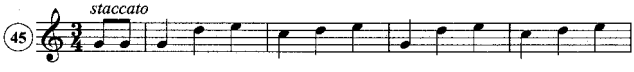


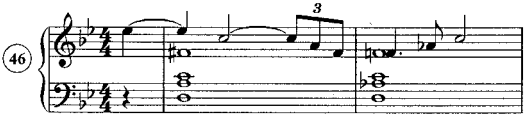
'Curse.'





Variation of (20).





'Shared death' (Kufferath).

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NOTES

ONE *Wagner and Religion*

1 See the "Overture" to Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Raw and the Cooked,* trans. J. and D. Weightman (London, 1978). Originally published as *Le cru et le cuit* (Paris, 1964). Lévi-Strauss refers to Wagner as *"ce Dieu, Richard Wagner,"* quoting from Mallarmé's sonnet.

2 In a striking contribution, René Girard has argued that Nietzsche's hostility to *Parsifal* was simply the other side of a deep attraction to and ultimate acceptance of its profoundly Christian message. See René Girard, "Nietzsche and Contradiction," *Stanford Italian Review* 6, 1–2 (1986): 53–65. Lucy Beckett, in what is surely one of the most sensitive recent accounts of *Parsifal,* makes a good case for the view that the opera is a genuinely Christian work of art; see her *Richard Wagner: Parsifal,* Cambridge Opera Handbook (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

3 This is the view put forward by Robert Gutman, for example, in *Richard Wagner: The Man, His Mind, and His Music* (London, 1968), and also by Bryan Magee in *Wagner and Philosophy* (London, 2001). Both writers understand the religious motives in *Parsifal* as purely symbolic, Gutman even interpreting the work as a kind of racist allegory, inspired by Wagner's notorious anti-Semitism.

4 See especially "Über Staat und Religion" in Richard Wagner, *Gesammelte Schriften und Dichtungen,* 2d ed., vol. 8 (Leipzig, 1888), 3–29.

5 "Die Religion und die Kunst" in Wagner, *Gesammelte Schriften und Dichtungen,* vol. 10, 211. The study of ancient myth and religion as giving form to universal psychic realities was, however, already common in German culture, not least because of Hegel. The true origin of the approach was probably Georg F. Creuzer's *Symbolik und Mythologie der alten Völker* (Leipzig and Darmstadt, 1810–12), a work that caused much controversy in its day.

6 See also the account given by Bryan Magee in *Wagner and Philosophy.*

7 Hugh Brody, *The Other Side of Eden* (London, 2001), 13.

8 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Case of Wagner,* section 9, in *The Birth of Tragedy, and the Case of Wagner,* trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1967).

9 See Michael Tanner, "The Total Work of Art," in *The Wagner Companion,* eds. Peter Burbage and Richard Sutton (London, 1979).

10 See Michael Tanner, *Wagner* (Princeton, 1996), chap. 11. The *locus classicus* for this interpretation of Wagner's drama is Joseph Kerman, "*Tristan* as Religious Drama," in *Opera as Drama*, rev. ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1958), 160ff. *"Erlösung,"* it should be noted, is a term whose use is normally confined to theological discussion. In other contexts it would be more normal to use *"Ablösung"* or (in the economic sphere) *"Rückkauf."*

TWO *The Story of Tristan*

1 See Richard Wagner, "Die Kunst und die Revolution," in *Gesammelte Schriften und Dichtungen,* vol. 3 (Leipzig, 1887), 16–17.

2 The theory that the legend of Tristan and Isolde is of Pictish origins was first adumbrated by Heinrich Zimmer, who pointed to the matrilineal inheritance relation between Mark and Tristan as proof. See Jessie L. Weston, *The Legends of the Wagner Drama: Studies in Mythology and Romance* (New York, 1896; reprint, New York: AMS Press, 1978), 301–302. The theory was defended by Rudolf Thurneysen, *Die irische Helden- und Königsage bis zum siebzehnten Jahrhundert* (Halle: Max Niemeyer, 1921). For a review of evidence, see W. J. McCann, "Tristan: The Celtic Material Re-examined," in *Gottfried von Strassburg and the Medieval Tristan Legend,* eds. Adrian Stevens and Roy Wisbey (Cambridge, 1990), 19–28, and Mark Chinca, *Gottfried von Strassburg: Tristan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997). The hypothesis of a Pictish origin does not square with the fact that, in almost all surviving versions, the action of the story takes place in Cornwall, Ireland, and Britanny. Moreover, Tristan and his story are several times mentioned in the early Welsh "Triads"—summaries of oral traditions, written down in the Middle Ages, but dating from earlier times. See Rachel Bromwich, *Trioedd ynys Prydein: The Welsh Triads,* ed. with an introduction, translation, and commentary (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1961).

3 See Maurice Kufferath, *Tristan et Iseult* (Leipzig, 1894), 94.

4 Wagner's edition was *Gottfried von Strassburg's Werke, herausgegeben durch Fr. H. von der Hagen,* 2 vols. (Breslau, 1823). Wagner's Dresden library also included two other editions of Gottfried's poem and a translation into modern German by Hermann Kurtz, whose introductory essay and doctored conclusion to the

poem anticipate Wagner's treatment. See Curt von Westernhagen, *Richard Wagner's Dresdener Bibliothek: 1842–1849* (Wiesbaden, 1966), 25–26.

5 See Roberto Antonelli, "The Birth of Criseyde," in *The European Tragedy of Troilus,* ed. Piero Boitani (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), 21–48.

6 In later life Chrétien composed an anti-Tristan—the tedious *Cligès*—which borrows some of Thomas's best passages in order to mount a somewhat stuffy defense of lawful matrimony. It is possible that Chrétien's version of the Tristan story is imitated by the twelfth-century Brunswickean poet Eilhart, whose version is the earliest surviving Tristan epic in German. See Kufferath, *Tristan et Iseult*, 108 ff. There is a modern English translation of the surviving fragments of Thomas's poem by the medievalist and crime novelist Dorothy L. Sayers: *Tristan in Brittany* (London, 1929).

7 Gaston Paris, "Lancelot du Lac: *Le Conte de la Charrette," Romania* 12 (1883): 459–534.

8 See, for example, C. S. Lewis, *The Allegory of Love: A Study in Medieval Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1936).

9 Other evidence frequently cited is similarly tenuous—for example, the alleged derivation of the Provençal *trobar*—to compose poetry—from Arabic *tarab,* meaning music or song. See Julián Ribera y Tarragó, *La música andaluza medieval en las canciones de trovadores, troveros y minnesinger,* 3 vols. (Madrid, 1923). For a review of the sources and the theories that have attempted to explain them, see Roger Boase, *The Origin and Meaning of Courtly Love* (Manchester, 1977).

10 Denis de Rougemont, *L'amour et l'occident* (Paris, 1939). Translated by Montgomery Belgion under the title *Passion and Society* (London, 1940; rev. ed., 1956).

11 Denis de Rougemont, *The Myths of Love,* trans. R. Howard (London, 1964).

12 Irving Singer, *Courtly and Romantic,* vol. 2 of *The Nature of Love* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 28–29.

13 Andreas Capellanus, *The Art of Courtly Love,* trans. John Jay Parry (New York, 1941).

14 Hence C. S. Lewis's description of courtly literature in *The Allegory of Love* as "Ovid misunderstood."

15 Many supposed judgments of the courts of love were presented by Martial d'Auvergne, a poet and lawyer who flourished at the end of the fifteenth century, and whose summary of the court proceedings—*Les Arrêts d'amour*—was enormously popular when first published in the sixteenth century. It is now generally thought that the courts of love were a literary fiction and did not exist in fact. For an English version, see *The Court of Love,* a poem once ascribed to Chaucer and included by Walter W. Skeat in the fourth volume of his edition

of Chaucer's works, *The Complete Works of Geoffrey Chaucer* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1899; reprint, 1963), 280–334.

16 This is the theme, for example, of Chaucer's *Parliament of Fowles,* in which the poet distinguishes the higher, rational birds—the eagles—from all fowls beneath them, by their ability both to postpone their "choice al fre" and by their decision, in consequence, to choose their partner forever and not just for the mating season.

17 See Gertrude Schoepperle, *Tristan and Isolt: A Study of the Sources of the Romance,* 2d ed. (New York, 1960).

18 Lyonesse may be the name of a Cornish county since submerged by the sea. The name Rivalin is surely the Breton Rivallon. In the twelfth century a Rivallon was seigneur of the Château de Combourg in Brittany, later a seat of the Chateaubriands and unforgettably described in Chateaubriand's *Mémoires d'outre-tombe.* The reference to Rivallon occurs in book 1, chap. 7, of Chateaubriand's work.

19 The name "Curvenal," retained by Wagner, is either a Breton name or possibly a corruption of "Cornwall." The French romancers tended to write the name as "Governail," thinking it to refer to Curvenal's character as governor or tutor to Tristan. As in many legends of this type, while the details of the story vary from author to author, names, however strange, are usually retained. This reflects the fact that names are central to rituals, and ritual is the secret source from which legend springs.

20 "Morold" is now generally thought to be "Morhoult," name of a legendary Irish sea monster.

21 Some light is cast on Isolt's motivation by Petrus W. Tax, "Wounds and Healings: Aspects of Salvation and Tragic Love in Gottfried's *Tristan,*" in *Gottfried von Strassburg and the Medieval Tristan Legend,* eds. Adrian Stevens and Roy Wisbey (Cambridge, 1990), 223–234.

22 See Lewis, *The Allegory of Love,* 119.

23 Chinca, *Gottfried von Strassburg: Tristan,* 27, and also 55ff, notes that the poems of Thomas and Gottfried are contemporaneous with the emerging canon-law view of marriage as a sacrament, and that part of the intention was to represent the relation of Tristan and Isolde as a *true* marriage, compared to the false marriage with Mark—true because consecrated, consecrated because already sacred, and sacred because indivisible.

24 Richard Wagner, "'The Prelude to 'Tristan und Isolde,'" in *The Prose Works of Richard Wagner,* vol. 8, trans. William Ashton Ellis (London, 1899), 386–87.

25 Any reader who doubts Wagner's ability to discern a unified "aesthetic idea" in the scattered digressions of medieval romance should read his two astonishing letters to Mathilde Wesendonck, in which, after a reading of Wolfram

von Eschenbach's *Parzival,* the composer wrestles with, resists, and is finally overcome by the vision that he was later to transcribe as a religious drama. *Richard Wagner to Mathilde Wesendonck,* trans. and ed. William Ashton Ellis (London, 1905), 140ff and 240ff.

THREE *Wagner's Treatment of the Story*

1 Because the motives are important and need to be constantly borne in mind during the discussion, I have provided a table of them in the appendix. I refer to the motives by the numbers given there, and occasionally by the names that have often been attached to them. The appendix includes the names used by Kobbé, Lavignac, Kufferath, and Cleather and Crump in their early (and now greatly underrated) studies of *Tristan und Isolde*. Some of these names have stuck, and it is more helpful than modern commentators often seem to imply to become acquainted with them.

2 The tent is a realm of darkness and truth, and the light of day shines on Tristan's betrayal. Hence the chink of light that falls on Brangäne's feet marks a fault line in the scheme of things. Adolphe Appia, in his original production, took every opportunity to mark the progress of daylight in the world beyond the tent. See his account, "The Staging of *Tristan and Isolde,*" first printed in 1899, translated in *Wagner on Music and Drama: A Selection from Richard Wagner's Prose Works,* eds. Albert Goldman and Evert Sprinchorn (London, 1970).

3 Alice Leighton Cleather and Basil Crump, *Tristan and Isolde: An Interpretation, Embodying Wagner's Own Explanations* (London, 1905), 50–51.

4 This point is made and pertinently developed by Frank W. Glass, *The Fertilizing Seed: Wagner's Concept of the Poetic Intent* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: UMI Research Press, 1983), 97.

5 Maurice Merleau-Ponty has made much of the distinctive phenomenological significance of the look—*le regard*—in *The Phenomenology of Perception,* trans. Colin Smith (London, 1962). The significance of the look in focusing and nourishing desire is persuasively and eloquently expressed by Sartre in his account of sexual relations: *Being and Nothingness,* trans. Hazel E. Barnes (London, 1957), 393 ff. The point was made in another context by Hegel: "if we ask in which particular organ the whole soul appears as soul, we will at once name the eye; for in the eye the soul is concentrated and the soul does not merely see through it but is seen in it." *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art,* trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 1:153. In all three philosophers the look is connected with the existential condition of self-consciousness—the condition that distinguishes us from the other animals. Animals may look *at* your eyes; they cannot look *into* them, the delusions of pet lovers notwithstanding. See chapter 5, this work.

6 "The Extasie" in *Songs and Sonets.* Donne's poem is a profound evocation of the way in which the body is perceived in desire.

7 See Maurice Kufferath, *Tristan et Iseult* (Leipzig, 1894).

8 "The Sorrows and Grandeur of Richard Wagner," in Thomas Mann, *Pro and Contra Wagner,* trans. Allan Blunden (London, 1985), 97.

9 Letter to Liszt, December 1854, in *Correspondence of Wagner and Liszt,* trans. Francis Hueffer (London, 1888), 2:54.

10 For these influences, see chapter 5, this work.

11 See the illuminating discussions by Anthony Newcomb, "Ritornello Ritornato: A Wagnerian Refrain Form," in *Analyzing Opera: Verdi and Wagner,* eds. Carolyn Abbate and Roger Parker (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 201–221, and by Carolyn Abbate in *Unsung Voices: Opera and Musical Narratives in the Nineteenth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 131–35.

12 C. S. Lewis, *The Allegory of Love: A Study in Medieval Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1936), 45.

13 See Hermann Paul, *Deutsches Wörterbuch,* 4th ed., ed. Karl Euling, (Halle: Max Niemeyer, 1935), 353.

14 *Richard Wagner to Mathilde Wesendonck,* trans. and ed. William Ashton Ellis (London, 1905), 95.

15 Novalis's *Hymnen an die Nacht,* which introduce the night/day symbolism in something like the way that Wagner employs it, identify night both with the beloved (who is the sun that shines in darkness) and with death. The idea of night as the womb from which we emerge and to which we return also exists in Novalis (see lines 178–82, for example), and recurs in Tristan's appeal to Isolde to follow him, at the end of act 2. It is significant that, while erotic love breathes through Novalis's lines like a constant animating breeze, the underlying message is that of the Christian sacrament. It is only a slight exaggeration to say that, poetically and metaphysically, Novalis's poem is a precursor of Wagner's drama—although in no way to be compared with it as a work of art.

16 Tristan's words echo the Upanishad quoted by Schopenhauer in §34 of *The World as Will and Representation,* trans. E. F. J. Payne (Indian Hills, Colo: Falcon's Wing Press, 1958), 181: "I am all this creation collectively, and besides me there exists no other being." For Schopenhauer they express the perspective of the pure Subject, emancipated from the bonds of individual existence, so as to be identical with the will itself.

17 Ernest Newman, *Wagner Nights* (London, 1949), 257.

18 There is, here, another reminiscence of the Upanishads: "As the flowing rivers disappear in the sea, discarding their name and their form, thus the illuminated one, freed from name and form, enters the divine Spirit, who is greater

than the great." *Mundaka Upanishad,* second Khanda, verse 8, ed. Max Müller (1888; reprint, Delhi, 1965), 2:41.

19 This is also one of many places in Wagner where a tremor of homosexual feeling makes itself felt: Marke addresses Tristan, not Isolde, as the one who has betrayed him, and his grieving music is not without a shade of erotic tenderness, as he outlines Tristan's place in his affections.

20 Wagner's attachment to the black-and-white sails (in his thinking, flags) of the old legend is revealed in the previously cited letter to Liszt, written in 1854 at the time when the drama was first taking shape in his mind: "with the "black flag" which floats at the end of it I shall cover myself to die." Letter to Liszt, December 1854.

21 The *Welt-Atem,* world breath, invoked in the final lines is evidently the *âtman,* breath or self, of the Upanishads. Wagner would have been aware of the etymological link between German *Atem* and Sanskrit *âtman,* as he was aware of the philosophical idea that the concept of *âtman* is used to express.

FOUR *The Music of* Tristan

1 Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation,* trans. E. F. J. Payne (Indian Hills, Colo.: Falcon's Wing Press, 1958), 2:448.

2 Ibid., 455.

3 Ibid., 456.

4 Ibid., 449.

5 See Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations,* trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1953), part 1, section 293.

6 I have defended this view at length in *The Aesthetics of Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997) and assume, for present purposes, an intuitive understanding of what it means.

7 See William Mann, "Down with Visiting Cards," in *Penetrating Wagner's Ring,* ed. John DiGaetani (London, 1978), 303–6.

8 Wagner to Wesendonck, 29 October 1859, *Richard Wagner to Mathilde Wesendonck,* trans. and ed. William Ashton Ellis (London, 1905), 184.

9 See especially the argument developed by Felix Salzer, *Structural Hearing,* 2 vols. (New York, 1952–62).

10 There is also a subliminal reference to the Death-devoted Head motive in this shift from A-flat to A-natural. Robert Bailey has suggested that the two notes A and A-flat/G-sharp have a special significance throughout the opera, which puts them into play at the outset, with the upbeat A leading to the G-sharp of the Tristan chord, itself preparing the dominant of A. See "An Analytical Study of the Sketches and Drafts," in *Wagner: Prelude and Transfiguration from* Tristan

und Isolde, ed. Robert Bailey, Norton Critical Scores (New York and London: W. W. Norton, 1985), 113–146.

11 Ernst Kurth, *Romantische Harmonik und ihre Krise in Wagners "Tristan."* The relevant passage can be found in *Ernst Kurth: Selected Writings,* trans. and ed. Lee A. Rothfarb (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 135–42.

12 See also the pertinent remarks by Carl Dahlhaus in John Deathridge and Carl Dahlhaus, *The New Grove Wagner* (London, 1984), 119.

13 It is only fair at this point to give credit to Liszt and especially to his Faust Symphony, whose opening twelve-note theme (adapted by Wagner for Sieglinde's nightmare), divides into two answering hexachords. The first movement of this symphony also contains a striking use of the Tristan chord, as well as a tense and speeded-up version of the Look motive. None of this detracts from Wagner's originality, which resides in powers of development and elaboration that change what in Liszt are mere novelties into powerful innovations in musical form.

14 See Barry Millington, *Wagner* (London, 1984), 241–42; I discuss Millington's analysis below.

15 Jean-Philippe Rameau, *Treatise on Harmony,* trans. Philip Gossett (New York: Dover Publications, 1971). On the Pythagorean and Platonic theories of harmony, see Hermann von Helmholtz, *On the Sensation of Tone,* trans. Alexander J. Ellis (1885; reprint, New York, 1954).

16 The relevant passages are translated in the Norton critical score of *Wagner: Prelude and Transfiguration from* Tristan und Isolde, ed. Robert Bailey (New York and London: W. W. Norton, 1985).

17 This seeming paradox is discussed in my *Aesthetics of Music,* chap. 2 and *passim.*

18 See the examples given in *Wagner: Prelude and Transfiguration,* ed. Bailey. On Riemann's functional analysis, see Scruton, *The Aesthetics of Music,* 325–26.

19 Musicologists influenced by set-theoretic analysis will no doubt find my account of this syntax to be informal and naïve. My purpose, however, has been to give an overview of the musical phenomenology that we encounter in *Tristan*. A more technical treatment can be found in Benjamin Boretz, "Meta-Variations, Part IV: Analytical Fallout," *Perspectives of New Music* (fall–winter, 1972): 164–201.

20 See Millington, *Wagner,* 241–42.

21 Carl Dahlhaus, *Richard Wagners Musikdramen* (Velber, 1971), 65.

22 Richard Wagner, *Oper und Drama,* in *Gesammelte Schriften und Dichtungen,* 2d ed., vol. 4 (Leipzig, 1888), 154.

23 The word was used by Wagner himself in Wagner to Wesendonck, 29 October 1859: *"das Geheimnis meiner musikalischen Form."*

24 Alfred Lorenz, *Das Geheimnis der Form bei Richard Wagner,* vol. 2: *Der Musikalische Aubau von Richard Wagners "Tristan und Isolde"* (Berlin, 1924), 174.

25 Carolyn Abbate and Robert Parker, eds., *Analyzing Opera: Verdi and Wagner* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 14.

26 See Scruton, *The Aesthetics of Music,* 313–29.

27 The relevant passages are translated in The Norton critical score, referred to in n. 16.

28 See Bailey, n. 10.

29 Carl Dahlhaus, "The Music," in *Wagner Handbook,* eds. Ulrich Müller and Peter Wapnewski, trans. John Deathridge (Cambridge, Mass., and London: Harvard University Press, 1992), 313.

30 T. S. Eliot, "Hamlet and His Problems," in *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism* (1920; reissue, London, 1960), 100.

31 I am borrowing these expressions in the sense given to them in my *Art and Imagination* (London: Methuen, 1974). Russell's own use of them was bound up with his untenable theory of meaning—see his "Knowledge by Acquaintance," in *Mysticism and Logic* (London, 1917). Some—Thomas Nagel, for example ("What is it like to be a bat?" in *Mortal Questions,* Cambridge University Press, 1979)—prefer the expression "knowing what it's like." That there is such a form of knowledge (subjective knowledge) is the premise of a metaphysical problem concerning the relation between the first- and the third-person points of view. Nagel gives one solution to this problem in *The View from Nowhere* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), I another in *Modern Philosophy: A Survey* (London: Sinclair-Stevenson, 1994), chaps. 4, 16, 29, and 31.

FIVE *The Philosophy of Love*

1 Avicenna (Ibn Sīnā) (980–1037), a physician, philosopher, and moralist of Persian origins, wrote mostly in Arabic, but translations and digests of his works were widely available in medieval Europe, influencing Aquinas among many others. Avicenna emphasized the rational essence of humanity, arguing that selfhood and individuality are bound up with rationality and are also defining features of our predicament. His discussion of erotic love—which he believed should be purified of its concupiscent component so as to become a rational tribute to the beloved—was heavily influenced by both Sufism and Plato. See A. M. Goichon, *La philosophie d'Avicenne et son influence en Europe médiévale* (Paris, 1944).

2 In a now classic study, the Swedish theologian Anders Nygren has plausibly argued that the transition from the Hellenic to the Christian worldview can be seen in terms of the rival conceptions of love contained in the Greek philosophers' theory of *eros* as the binding principle of the cosmos versus the Christian advocacy of *agape* as a duty to God. *Eros* in Plato, Plotinus, and the Neo-

platonists is the means whereby man ascends to God; *agape,* for Saint Paul and Saint John, is the means whereby God descends to man; the first is a desire to possess; the second a duty to give. See Anders Nygren, *Agape and Eros: A Study of the Christian Idea of Love,* 2 vols., trans. A. G. Herbert (London, 1932). However true the analysis, however, it does nothing to remove the problem that confronted the poets and philosophers of courtly love, which was that of the place of sexual desire in a Christian society—i.e., a society in which *agape* was the only love that was officially sanctioned.

3 Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae,* 2a 2ae, 23–33. Aquinas sometimes uses the term *amor* to denote the love of God and of neighbor; his normal word for "to love," however, is *diligere,* the verb used in the Vulgate to render the command to love thy neighbor as thyself: *diliges proximum sicut te ipsum.* About erotic love Aquinas is silent.

4 Among recent writers who endorse the Thomist view are José Ortega y Gasset, *On Love: Aspects of a Single Theme,* trans. Tony Talbot (London, 1959); Maurice Blondel, *Exigences philosophiques du Christianisme* (Paris, 1950); and Josef Pieper, *Über die Liebe* (Munich, 1972).

5 Any one-page summary of Kant's metaphysics is bound to be controversial. My interpretation of the "transcendental unity of apperception" is heavily influenced by Wittgenstein, partly because I believe that Kant, had he read Wittgenstein, would have agreed. I defend my interpretation in *Kant: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001). The unity of apperception, I maintain, translates into the ability of self-conscious subjects to ascribe their own present mental states to themselves, immediately, incorrigibly, and without recourse to any criterion, including a criterion of identity across time. This unity is "transcendental" in that it is presupposed in all self-knowledge, in all exercises of reason, and also in the skeptical arguments that purport to cast doubt on it. The full account of the "first-person case," as adumbrated in the Transcendental Deduction and the Paralogisms of the *Critique of Pure Reason,* had to wait, I believe, until Wittgenstein's "private language" argument, expounded in his *Philosophical Investigations,* trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1953). As for the regiments of Kantian scholars who do not see the connection with Wittgenstein, to the crows with them.

6 For a detailed theory of aspect perception and the kind of objectivity that pertains to it, see my *Art and Imagination: A Study in the Philosophy of Mind* (London: Methuen, 1974).

7 See the introduction to Max Müller's edition of the Upanishads, vol. 1 (1888; reissue, Delhi, 1965).

8 Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation,* trans. E. F. J. Payne (Indian Hills, Colo.: Falcon's Wing Press, 1958), 1:398.

9 See the chapter "On Death and Its Relation to the Indestructibility of Our Inner Nature," added as a supplement to bk. 4 of Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation,* 2:507–8. The day/night symbolism in Wagner's opera is, of course, incomparably richer than this suggests, and is as much derived from Novalis as from Schopenhauer. See the penetrating discussion in Dieter Borchmeyer, *Richard Wagner, Theory and Theatre,* trans. Stewart Spencer (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 326–67.

10 See Borchmeyer, *Richard Wagner, Theory and Theatre,* 363–64.

11 Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation,* 2:549.

12 There is a parallel here with semantic theories that attempt to explain proper names as disguised descriptions, and which therefore ignore what is essential in proper names—namely, their individualizing logic. See Saul Kripke's classic discussion of Searle's theory of proper names in his *Naming and Necessity* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1980). Wagner's insight into the nature of desire leads him to place proper names at the very center of the mystical dialogue between Tristan and Isolde in Act 2.

13 See Borchmeyer, *Richard Wagner, Theory and Theatre,* 365–66.

14 Hafiz became popular in Germany as a result of Goethe's *Westöstlicher Divan,* though it is doubtful that Goethe and his immediate followers understood the deeply religious nature of Hafiz's sensuous imagery. *Ghazâl* is not Persian but Arabic, from *ghazala,* to flirt or make love. Writers have discerned versions of the Tristan legend in the writings of later Sufi mystics, notably in the narrative poem of Salámán and Absál, by the Persian Sufi Jámí (1414–1492). See Alice Leighton Cleather and Basil Crump, *Tristan and Isolde: An Interpretation, Embodying Wagner's Own Explanations* (London, 1905), 123 ff.

15 It is true that there are those who argue that the "problematization" of sexual desire is not merely a cultural variable but also deeply unnecessary. The most influential instance in our time is Michel Foucault, whose *Histoire de la sexualité* (3 vols., Pari, 1984) sets out to liberate sexual desire from the arbitrary constraints (as he sees them) of morality. I argue the opposite point of view in *Sexual Desire: A Philosophical Investigation* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1986).

16 "Three Essays on Sexuality," in Sigmund Freud, *On Sexuality,* trans. and ed. J. Strachey and A. Richards (Harmondsworth, 1977), 61.

17 Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness,* trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York, 1956), bk. 3, chap. 3.

18 Although there are satyrlike and priapic forms of lust, the experience in which they are founded already contains the individualizing intentionality that they seem on the surface to deny. The orgy violates this intentionality but also depends upon it, since its excitement is inseparable from its character as a transgression.

19 On the importance of the involuntary nature of a blush, see the suggestive account in Christopher Ricks, *Keats and Embarrassment* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), 50 ff.

20 On the charm of disenchantment, see my *Perictione in Colophon* (South Bend, Ind.: St. Augustine's Press, 2000), chap. 8.

21 See Karl Marx, *Das Kapital,* vol. 1, chap. 1, §4.

22 In his suggestive account of the gaze *(le regard),* Merleau-Ponty argues that the gaze of the stranger is, in itself, an appropriation of my freedom, since it removes from me some part of my being. Only through recognition of the other as in his body as I am in mine—so that his body ceases to be an object and becomes instead a body known from within as mine is known—is my freedom restored to me. See Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception,* trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1962), 351–62. Without endorsing Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological method, one can nevertheless recognize an important thought here, which suggests a deep contrast between the gaze of the stranger and the gaze of intimacy. In the gaze of intimacy freedom is not asserted against the other but offered to him. The distinction is made vivid by the contrast between staring and looking. Sartre makes similar observations in his description of the glance of desire in *Being and Nothingness,* 398.

23 Also later: *"Mein Herr und Ohm, sieh die dir an: ein sanftres Weib gewännst du nie."* "My lord and uncle, you'll never find a softer woman."

24 Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals,* Academy edition, 429.

25 C. S. Lewis, *The Four Loves,* (London, 1960). Lewis's four loves are affection, friendship, *eros,* and charity (*agape*). The quotation is from p. 73.

26 Pieper, *Über die Liebe,* 171.

27 It should be said that Kant did not himself agree with the ideas I have expounded in his name, but remained wedded to the medieval Christian vision of sexual desire as a bodily appetite: *die Geschlechtsneigung . . . [kann] keine liebe sein, sondern Appetit.* From Kant, *Lectures on Ethics,* ed. Paul Menzer (Berlin, 1925), 204 ff. But see my *Kant: A Very Short Introduction,* 125–26.

28 Michel de Montaigne, "Of Friendship," *Essays,* bk. 1, no. xxvii.

29 See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics,* bk. 8; Kant, *Lectures on Ethics.*

30 Wagner puts into Christ's mouth the following words: "It is a good law: Thou shalt not commit adultery, and he who commits adultery sins thereby. But I preserve you from this sin, inasmuch as I give you the law of God, which says: Thou shalt not marry without love." Richard Wagner, *Jesus of Nazareth and Other Writings,* trans. William Ashton Ellis (1899; reissue, Lincoln, Neb., and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), 303.

31 For a modern Catholic defense of this position, see Jean Guitton, *Essay on Human Love,* trans. Melville Chaning-Pearce (London: Rockliff, 1951).

SIX *Tragedy and Sacrifice*

1 Richard Wagner, *The Art-Work of the Future, and Other Works,* trans. William Ashton Ellis (Lincoln, Neb., and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1993), 165–66

2 Ibid., 165.

3 See E. R. Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1951).

4 Gilbert Murray's views can be found in his "Excursus on the Ritual Forms Preserved in Greek Tragedy," reprinted in J. E. Harrison, *Themis: A Study in the Social Origins of Greek Religion* (New York, 1962), 341–63. The ritualistic interpretations given by Murray were stilted and far-fetched, and his approach was effectively killed off by A. W. Pickard-Cambridge in *Dithyramb, Tragedy, and Comedy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1927).

5 The debate between the religious and the theatrical interpretations of tragedy is never-ending. Some of the many positions can be found in Erich Segal, ed., *Oxford Readings in Greek Tragedy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983). On the medical metaphor in Aristotle's *Poetics* and its ultimately unhelpful character, see F. R. Leavis, "'Tragedy and the 'Medium,' " in *The Common Pursuit* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1952).

6 See especially Albert Henrichs, "Loss of Self, Suffering, Violence: The Modern View of Dionysus, from Nietzsche to Girard," *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 88 (1984): 205–40.

7 See Charles Segal, "Catharsis, Audience, and Closure," in *Tragedy and the Tragic: Greek Theatre and Beyond,* ed. M. S. Silk (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 149–72.

8 For a defense of this view, see Francis Fergusson, *The Idea of a Theater: A Study of Ten Plays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1949). The debate goes on, between those who think that the drama in some way replaced and secularized the ritual of Dionysus, and those who believe that the old ritual was simply a convenient gathering at which to present a theatrical performance. See Rainer Friedrich, "Everything To Do with Dionysos?" in Silk, *Tragedy and the Tragic,* 257–83, and the reply by Richard Seaford, ibid., 284–94.

9 See Walter F. Otto, *Dionysus: Myth and Cult,* trans. Robert B. Palmer (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1965).

10 A. D. Nuttall, *Why Does Tragedy Give Pleasure?* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996). Nuttall's thesis is rather more provisional and nuanced than I have, for heuristic purposes, implied.

11 This question is much harder than it looks. It is not answered, in my view, either by the theory of make-believe interestingly advanced by Kendall Walton in *Mimesis as Make-Believe* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990) or by the theory of imagination developed in my *Art and Imagination* (London: Methuen, 1974) and subsequent works.

12 Sir James Frazer, *The Golden Bough,* especially the volumes on Attis and Adonis, summarized in the abridged edition (London, 1959), 324–55; and Jessie L. Weston, *From Ritual to Romance* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1957).

13 René Girard, *La violence et le sacré* (Paris, 1972).

14 Walter Burkert, *Homo Necans: The Anthropology of Ancient Greek Sacrificial Ritual and Myth,* trans. Peter Bing (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983).

15 This idea derives from K. Meuli, "Griechische Opferbrauche," in *Phyllobolia für Peter von der Mühll* (Basel, 1946), 185–288.

16 See, for example, J-P Vernant's rebuttal of Burkert, "Théorie générale du sacrifice et mise à mort dans la *Thusia* grecque," in *Le sacrifice dans l'antiquité,* Entretiens Hardt 27 (1981); J. Z. Smith, "The Domestication of Sacrifice," in *Violent Origins: Walter Burkert, René Girard, and Jonathan Z. Smith on Ritual Killing and Cultural Formation,* ed. R. G. Hamerton-Kelly (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987), 191–205; Paul Veyne, "Inviter les dieux, sacrifier, banqueter: Quelques nuances de la religiosité gréco-romaine," *Annales d'Histoire des Sciences Sociales* 2000, no. 1: 3–42, and Robert Parker, "Sacrifice and Battle," in *War and Violence in Ancient Greece,* ed. Hans van Wees (London, 2000), 299–314

17 Jean-Pierre Vernant and Pierre Vidal-Nacquet, *Mythe et tragédie en Grèce ancienne,* vol. 1 (Paris, 1972), chap. 6.

18 However, it should be noted how very different are the treatments of Orestes' pursuit in Aeschylus and Euripides.

19 René Girard, *Le bouc émissaire* (Paris, 1982).

20 See René Girard, *La route antique des hommes pervers* (Paris: Éditions Livre de Poche, 1988), 113 ff.

21 Cosima Wagner, *Diaries*, ed. Martin Gregor-Dellin and Dietrich Mack, trans. Geoffrey Skelton, vol. 2 (London, 1980), 855, 861.

22 "The Sorrows and Grandeur of Richard Wagner," in Thomas Mann, *Pro and Contra Wagner,* trans. Allan Blunden (London: Faber and Faber, 1985), 100.

23 Claude Lévi-Strauss, "Langage et paternité," in *Anthropologie Structurale* (Paris, 1960), 35–60.

24 See Ruth Padel, *Whom Gods Destroy: Elements of Greek and Tragic Madness* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995). Padel's account of tragedy is based on her subtle analysis of the implicit theory of the mind that is assumed by the tragedians: see *In and Out of the Mind: Greek Images of the Tragic Self* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992).

SEVEN *Love, Death, and Redemption*

1 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo,* section 6.

2 The classical discussion of the transcendental self occurs in "Paralogisms of Pure Reason," in Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason.* The long tradition begun by Kant, reaching through Fichte, Hegel, and Schopenhauer to Heidegger and Sartre, has also found echoes in analytical philosophy. See Thomas Nagel's recent attempt to restate the Kantian position, without extraneous metaphysical commitments, in *The View from Nowhere* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

3 Preface to *The Bostonians.*

4 A similar argument concerning the antierotic nature of pornography can be found in Octavio Paz, *The Double Flame: Essays on Love and Eroticism,* trans. Helen Lane (London, 1996). Modern pornography is of course a long way from the story of Troilus and Cressida, but it reinforces the connection between substitution and desecration. The last stage of pornography, in which the sexual object is detached completely from the individual subject, is the act of double penetration—as described, for example, by Michel Houellebecq in *Plateforme* (Paris, 2001). There is, here, the theme of a book: *From Troilus to Troilism.*

5 Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion,* trans. W. R. Trask (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1959), 202–3.

6 In T. S. Eliot, *On the Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism: Studies in the Relation of Criticism to Poetry in England* (London: Faber and Faber, 1933).

7 This point is persuasively expounded by Paul W. Kahn in his remarkable study of King Lear: *Law and Love: The Trials of* King Lear (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000), chap. 8.

8 Jan Patočka, *Kacířské eseje o filozofii dějin* (Munich, 1980), 117–34. For the German translation, see Patočka, *Ketzerische Essais zur Philosophie der Geschichte,* eds. Klaus Nellen and Jíří Němec (Vienna, 1988), 146–64.

9 Luc Ferry, *L'homme-Dieu: ou le sens de la vie* (Paris, 1996). "La première hypothèse de ce livre est que la question du sens et celle du sacré—de ce pourquoi il ne serait pas insensé de songer à un *sacrifice*—sont inséparables," 46.

10 Quoted in Ernest Newman, *Wagner Nights* (London, 1949), 205.

EIGHT *Epilogue*

1 Jessie L. Weston, *From Ritual to Romance* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1957).

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